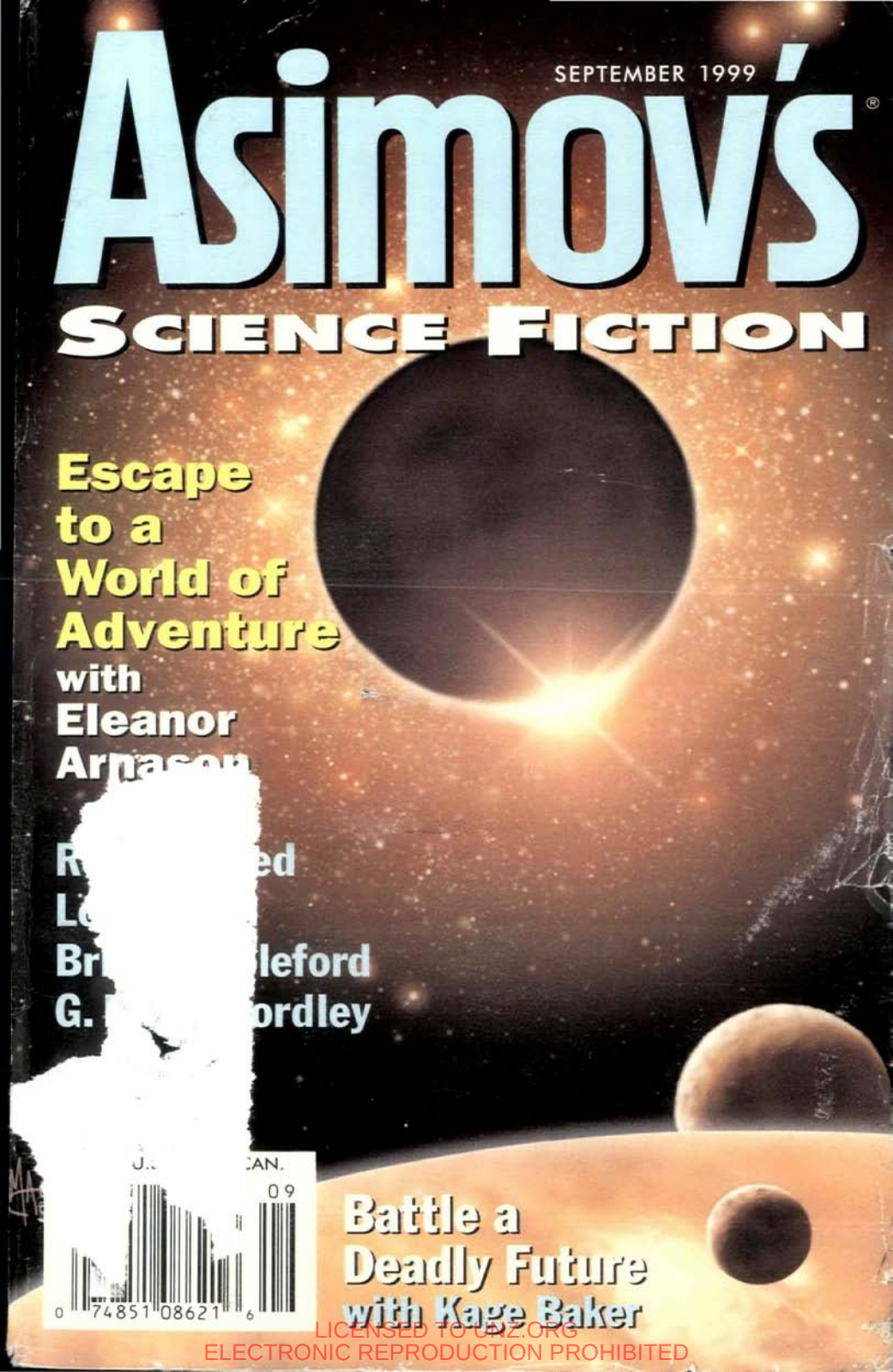
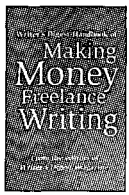

SEPTEMBER 1999
Asimov's
SCIENCE FICTION
Escape to a World of Adventure with Eleanor Arnason
Battle a Deadly Future with Kage Baker

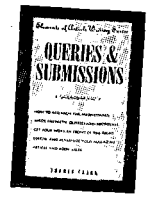
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Discover the Secrets of Fiction Writing that Sells!



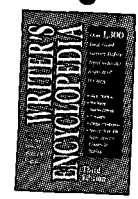
#10501 $19.99

#10506 $16.99 pb

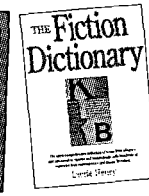


#10426 $15.99

#10507 $16.99 pb



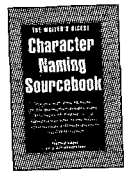
#10464 $22.99



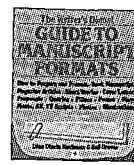
#48008 $18.99

#43057
$27.98 pbs
Count both books as one selection.

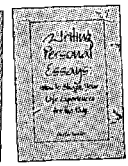
Volumes 1 & 2



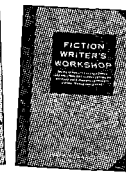
#10390 $18.99



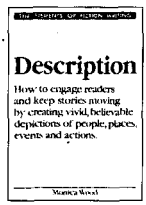
#10025 $19.99



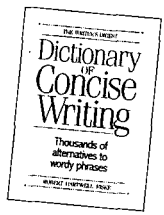
#10438 $17.99



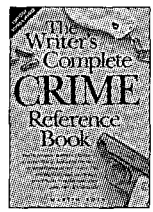
#48003 $17.99


Description
How to engage readers and keep stories moving by creating vivid, believable depictions of people, places, events and actions.

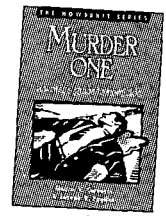
#10451 $15.99



#10482 $19.99

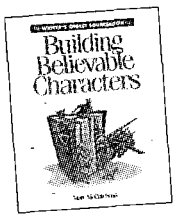


#10371 $19.99

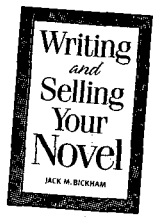


#10498 $16.99 pb

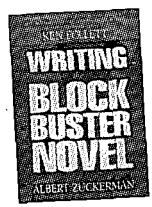
#10500 $21.99



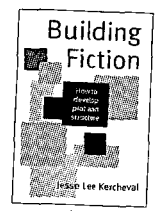
#10463 $17.99



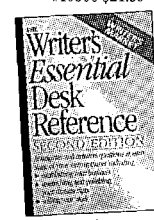
#10509 $17.99



#10393 $18.99



#48028 $16.99 pb



#10485 $24.99

AS A CLUB MEMBER, YOU'LL ENJOY:

- **DISCOUNTS FROM 15-65%** on every book you buy!
- **FREE SHIPPING & HANDLING** on prepaid orders (after this joining offer)!
- **SATISFACTION GUARANTEED 100%!**

HOW THE CLUB WORKS

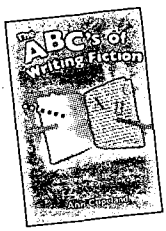
You'll receive the *BULLETIN* about fourteen times a year, featuring a Main Selection and 100 or more of the newest and best writing instruction books. If you want the Main Selection, do nothing, and it will be sent automatically. If you want a different book, or want nothing that month, you'll always have at least 10 days to decide and notify the Club by returning your Selection Card. If late delivery of the *BULLETIN* should ever cause you to receive a book you don't want, you may return it at Club expense. As a new member you agree to purchase one book from the *BULLETIN* within the next six months; after that, you may cancel your membership at any time. Each time you buy a book, your membership will be renewed for six months from the purchase date.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

TAKE 2 BOOKS

FREE*

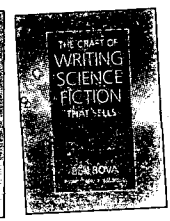
WITH 1 FOR JUST $9.95 WHEN YOU JOIN WRITER'S DIGEST BOOK CLUB!



48017 $18.99

#10483 $17.99

#10470 $16.99



#10395 $16.99

#10512 $27.99 pb

MEMBERSHIP SAVINGS CERTIFICATE

☐ YES! I want to join Writer's Digest Book Club. Please sign me up and send me:

My first FREE book #_____	FREE
and my second FREE book #_____	FREE
with my third book #_____ for only	$ 9.95
*plus shipping and handling	$ 6.53
all for just	$ 16.48

(Payment in U.S. funds must accompany order. Ohio residents add 60¢ tax; Canadians in postal codes A, B or E add $2.47 HST; all other Canadians add $1.15 GST.)

☐ Check enclosed or Charge my ☐ VISA ☐ MasterCard

Acct # | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | Exp. Date: _____

I have read How The Club Works and agree to buy 1 more book in the next 6 months.

Signature_____
required on all certificates

Name_____

Address_____

City_____ State/Prov _____ ZIP/PC_____

Writer's Digest BOOK CLUB

Limited time offer good for new members in U.S. and Canada only. U.S. funds only. Allow 3-4 weeks for delivery. All applications subject to approval.

P.O. Box 12948 Cincinnati, Ohio 45212-0948

AS64

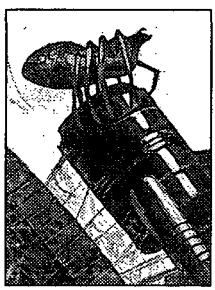
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Asimov's SCIENCE FICTION

Vol. 23 No. 9 (Whole Number 284)
September 1999

Next Issue on Sale
September 14, 1999

104



70

Cover illustration by
Dr. Mark A. Garlick

www.asimovs.com

NOVELLA

104 Dapple: A *Hwarhath* Historical Romance — Eleanor Arnason

NOVELETTES

16 Nodaway — Robert Reed
50 Smart Alec — Kage Baker
70 Hidden Agendas — Brian Stableford

SHORT STORIES

40 The Scientific Community — Lois Tilton
100 Mustardseed — G. David Nordley

POETRY

38 Curse of the Fantasy Writer's Wife — Bruce Boston
69 splashdown — Danny Daniels
99 Mathematical Limericks — Bruce Boston

DEPARTMENTS

4 Reflections: HTTP, Etc. — Robert Silverberg
8 Thirteenth Annual Readers' Awards — Gardner Dozois
12 On the Net: Sci-fi — James Patrick Kelly
136 On Books — Peter Heck
142 The SF Conventional Calendar — Erwin S. Strauss

Gardner Dozois: Editor — Sheila Williams: Executive Editor
Isaac Asimov: Editorial Director (1977-1992)
Peter Kanter: Publisher — Christine Begley: Associate Publisher

Stories from *Asimov's* have won thirty-two Hugos and twenty-four Nebula Awards, and our editors have received thirteen Hugo Awards for Best Editor.
Asimov's was also the 1998 recipient of the Locus Award for Best Magazine.

Asimov's Science Fiction (USPS 522-310). Published monthly except for a combined October/November double issue by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications. One year subscription $39.97 in the United States and U.S. possessions. In all other countries $47.97 (GST included in Canada), payable in advance in U.S. funds. Address for subscription and all other correspondence about them, Box 54033, Boulder, CO 80322-4033. Allow 6 to 8 weeks for change of address. Address for all editorial matters: *Asimov's Science Fiction*, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, N.Y. 10016. *Asimov's Science Fiction* is the registered trademark of Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications.

© 1999 by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855. All rights reserved, printed in the U.S.A. Protection secured under the Universal and Pan American Copyright Conventions. Reproduction or use of editorial or pictorial content in any manner without express permission is prohibited. All submissions must include a self-addressed, stamped envelope; the publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts.

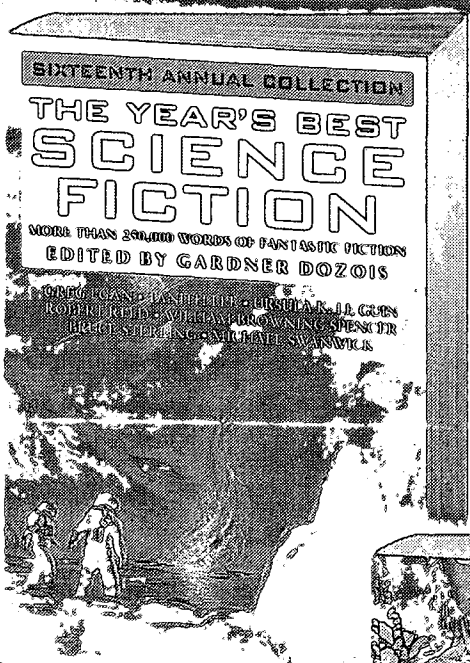
Periodical postage paid at Norwalk, CT and additional mailing offices. Canadian postage paid at Montreal, Quebec, Canada Post International Publications Mail, Product Sales Agreement No. 260657. POSTMASTER, send change of address to *Asimov's Science Fiction*, Box 54625, Boulder, CO 80328-4625. In Canada return to Transcontinental Sub Dept, 525 Louis Pasteur, Boucherville, Quebec, J4B 8E7. ISSN 1065-2698. GST #R123293128

Printed in CANADA

PRINTED WITH SOY INK

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

IF YOU WANT TO READ ONLY THE VERY BEST...



THE YEAR'S BEST SCIENCE FICTION

Edited by Gardner Dozois

"Anyone interested in contemporary short SF should own this volume."
—*Washington Post Book World*

THE YEAR'S BEST FANTASY AND HORROR

Edited by Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling

"The most consistently literate and unusual of the various 'best of' anthologies."
—*Locus*

ST. MARTIN'S GRIFFIN

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

HTTP, ETC.

I used to be what marketers call an "early adopter," one who is no pioneer, but follows quickly behind the true trailblazers as technological innovations appear. I was quick to buy a VCR back in the 1970s; I once had a rotary-engine Mazda car; I jumped at such gizmos as answering machines, faxes, and portable phones. I'm not fundamentally skillful with machines, but I do know how to read instruction manuals. Many times I was so far ahead of the curve that to a certain extent I found my use of the gadgets restricted: back then, for instance, a lot of people saw answering machines as brutal inhuman devices and sniffily refused to leave messages on them. And when I got my fax, I found I had to proselytize fax usage among my business associates so I'd have someone to send faxes to.

Same with personal computers. When the first primordial ones appeared I trundled down to a primordial computer store, where I learned that the computers of the moment, which employed little tape decks for their memories, would soon be replaced with ones using something called floppy disks, and I'd be well advised to wait. Soon floppies did arrive, and then a thing called a Winchester, what is now called a hard disk. When I finally got a computer, in 1982, it was a magnificent model far more capable than the crude and flimsy little gizmos of a few years before, a substantial machine equipped with an enormous ten-megabyte hard disk.

Somewhere along the way, though, I stopped being an early adopter and turned into a crusty old resister. Was it age? Laziness? Who knows?

It happened about 1985, when DOS-based PCs began to replace the wildly individualistic computers of earlier days. My computer was wholly non-compatible with anyone else's, but I was so fond of its word-processing software that I went on using it regardless. This made it impossible to exchange diskettes with other people or to submit my work in diskette form to publishers, but I shrugged off my increasing isolation. Writers are accustomed to being loners.

I couldn't, of course, remain outside the DOS zone forever. In 1991 my computer and its printer suddenly lost contact with each other, and no one remembered how to service either machine. Whatever I wrote would now stay trapped in digital form forever.

By then my word-processing software was available in a DOS version, so I bought a new PC and shifted over. But my growing resistance to technological change showed in the way I had the new computer configured: I went on using my 1982 programs and ignored DOS as much as possible, even finding a way of booting up without bothering with DOS at all.

By this time a concept called e-mail had begun coming to my attention. A lot of colleagues started telling me how they were in constant contact with each other and with readers and fans by way of their computers. I recoiled at it. I'm congenial enough in the company of fans, having been one myself once,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and was accustomed to getting the occasional phone call telling me how wonderful my books are or what a dumb conceptual error I made in resolving the last one's plot. Those calls were infrequent enough to be manageable, but I didn't want to get lots and lots of them in some new electronic form. As for business mail, the fax seemed quite fast enough for me. So I paid no attention as the e-mail phenomenon mushroomed.

I grew very set in my ways indeed. One morning DOS was obsolete and everybody was shifting over to Windows and using a thing called a mouse to move the cursor around. To hell with that, I thought. What little I knew of DOS served me fine for such computer uses as I had—writing, books, keeping business records, doing taxes—and once again I didn't bother to move on.

Then the Internet happened. Sidney Coleman, a long-time friend of mine who is not only an SF fan but also a professor of physics at Harvard, was the first to use the term within my hearing, about 1990. Physicists all over the world were sending lengthy technical papers to one another, instantaneously and without cost, by way of this Internet. That struck me as useful for physicists, but I am not now and never have been a physicist, and I said only, "How is it possible to send lengthy long-distance messages for nothing?" Sidney couldn't answer that. He is an unworldly man in some ways. I concluded that the universities must be subsidizing the Internet for the benefit of their physicists. For that reason and others, I didn't see how the Internet was likely to be relevant to my life.

References to the Internet began surfacing in the popular press. Most of them sounded anthropological to me: stuff about chat rooms and flame wars, for example. There was

GARDNER DOZOIS
Editor

SHEILA WILLIAMS
Executive Editor

PAUL STEVENS
Editorial Assistant

DANIEL IMAL
Technical Assistant

ARIEN HOOGERWERF
Editorial Assistant

VICTORIA GREEN
Senior Art Director

SHIRLEY CHAN LEVI
Assistant Art Director

CAROLE DIXON
Production Manager

ABIGAIL BROWNING
Manager Subsidiary Rights and Marketing

SCOTT LAIS
Contracts & Permissions

JULIA McEVOY
Manager, Advertising Sales

BRUCE W. SHERBOW
Director of Newsstand Sales

SANDY MARLOWE
Circulation Services

PETER KANTER
Publisher

CHRISTINE BEGLEY
Associate Publisher

WARREN RIVERS
Editorial Director

SUSAN KENDRIOSKI
Executive Director, Art and Production

ISAAC ASIMOV
Editorial Director
(1977-1992)

ADVERTISING REPRESENTATIVE
David Geller Publishers' Rep. (212) 682-1540

CLASSIFIED ADVERTISING
Russell Johns Associates (800)237-9851

Please do not send us your manuscript until you've gotten a copy of our manuscript guidelines. To obtain this, send us a self-addressed, stamped business-size envelope (what stationery stores call a number 10 envelope), and a note requesting this information. Please write "manuscript guidelines" in the bottom left-hand corner of the outside envelope. The address for this and for all editorial correspondence is *Asimov's Science Fiction*, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, NY 10016. While we're always looking for new writers, please, in the interest of time-saving, find out what we're looking for, and how to prepare it, before submitting your story.

www.asimovs.com

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

much talk about Internet jargon, the funny faces that people draw using keyboard type, etc. I heard about computer games that office workers played when the boss wasn't looking. I am my own boss and any games I play at work subtract from my productivity in an expensive way. All this seemed silly and useless, one more boomer-generation toy.

But then the practical uses began to arrive. Wherever I looked, suddenly, it was http: this and www. that. "See our site for further information," I read, as I leafed through some hotel brochure or financial report. "Order directly from our site." "Details available via the Internet." Books and phonograph records (as I quaintly call CDs) could be bought via computer. I could summon up the resources of major libraries from home; I could access vast bibliographical indexes and discover how many of my books had been pirated by Greek or Hungarian publishers; I could get restaurant recommendations in far-off cities. None of that was available to me. I was locking myself out. I saw that I was deliberately cutting myself off from something I could easily afford and had the intellectual resources to master.

Karen began to get seriously interested. I still resisted, but mainly just out of fatigue, now. I could see some merit in the new medium, sure, and had no doubt that its importance would only grow and grow, but I was working very hard, too hard, writing big novels that left me little surplus energy, and the thought of mastering a new kind of computer and learning how to navigate the Internet appalled me at that moment. "When not being on the Internet starts to be like not having a telephone, I'll join up," I said. "Not until then." I figured I was buying myself four or five years before the necessity of the thing became imperative.

It was astonishing how quickly not being on the Internet felt like not having a telephone.

In 1997 Karen and I went to far-off, isolated East Germany, which had been a techno-cultural backwater for fifty years. Young East German fans had learned all about me from the bibliographical resources of the Internet. They wanted to exchange e-mail addresses with us. I had to tell them that I didn't have one, which amazed them and left me somewhat abashed.

My publishers asked me to do on-line promotional interviews and chats with fans. They knew that I didn't have e-mail and so I was unable to submit my manuscripts to them instantaneously by electronic means as other writers now did; but they hoped I could somehow do the on-line stuff anyway. Various friends helped me do the interviews by providing their own on-line time and walking me through the process of hooking up with the interviewers. Though they never said so, I could tell that they regarded my unwillingness to equip myself with on-line capacity as quaint at best, if not oddly reactionary and cantankerous. I was put in mind of my mother's own refusal, to the end of her days, to bother with anything so newfangled as a touch-tone telephone. Though hampered by arthritis, she continued using the old circular dial regardless of its draw-backs. After a time I gave up urging her to make the switch. Was I turning into the same sort of stubborn stick-in-the-mud?

Okay, I said, finally. Give me six months to finish this book and then we'll buy a computer with Internet capacity, a computer that I won't use for work but only for Internet stuff, and we'll sign up and figure out how it's all done.

And so it came to pass. I bought a jazzy 266-mhz laptop with all sorts

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of bells and whistles, and though I barely understood what tunes the bells and whistles were meant to play, I figured that buying a pricey computer guaranteed us against technical obsolescence for a good six to eight months. We plugged it in and away we went.

It's very cute. Lots of bright colors on screen, lots of interesting windows and sidebars, all very different from the staid look of my DOS-type screen. Quickly we figured out how to do e-mail and how to locate web sites. I haven't progressed much beyond that point. I still don't have much idea how Windows works. I'm not very clear about installing plug-ins and other accessory software. Et cetera. None of that matters. I'm non-young and I don't have to be a cutting-edge kind of guy any more.

But I do use the thing. Daily and copiously, in fact. I took part in an on-line question-and-answer session with the attendees of a convention in the Czech Republic. I exchange e-mails with an eighteen-year-old Bulgarian fan who is fluent in English and supplies me with copies of my Bulgaria-published novels. I've made rewarding contacts in Spain, Greece, Croatia, Finland, and Sweden too. Right this minute Karen is roaming the San Francisco Opera's web site for information about next season. We check the web's travel resources for reviews of restaurants and hotels in places we plan to visit. I've set up Worldcon dinner arrangements and business meetings by e-mail, ever so much more swiftly than I could have done even by fax. And yesterday, hearing an interesting and unfamiliar piece of music on the radio, I surfed up information about the recording from the site of the British magazine *Gramophone*.

Our use of its informational facilities grows daily—finding a suburban theater that's still showing a film we missed when it played in San Francisco, setting up a winter vacation in Phoenix, checking on stock-market news, even finding a new kitten via the Internet. All that could have been managed in other ways, of course, but not without considerably more effort; and, like everybody else who has tiptoed into cyberspace, we now wonder how we managed to get along without Internet access for so long.

So I have become a member of the Internet generation at last. Ignore the fact that I still use a poky old 386 computer without Windows to write my novels. The novels get written; I don't need a computer that functions five million times faster than I do in order to write them. But there's that other computer too, the little one with the bells and whistles.

And I admit with great chagrin, now that I'm finally there, that the Internet is an extraordinarily exhilarating place and I wish I hadn't been so crustily stubborn about signing on. One of my most endearing human characteristics (I have two or three others) is my willingness to admit that I've been wrong, once I actually do come to see that I have been. This was one time when I was *really* wrong. I should have joined up long ago. The Internet isn't just an interesting intrusion from the future any more. That's how I saw it as recently as a couple of years ago, but that was then and this is now, and it's become a huge and constantly growing chunk of the present. To opt out of it, as I'd been doing for so long, is essentially to opt out of the twenty-first century—which very shortly isn't going to be the future any more either. O

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

13TH ANNUAL READERS' AWARD RESULTS

by Gardner Dozois

Photo Credit: Beth Gwinn

Pictured from Left to Right: Peter Kanter, Kristine Kathryn Rusch, Gardner Dozois, Laurel Winter, and Sheila Williams

It's time to tell you the winners of *Asimov's Science Fiction's* Annual Readers' Award Poll, which is now in its thirteenth year. As always, these were your choices, the stories and artwork and poetry that you—the readers—liked best out of all the stuff we published in 1998. The readers were the only judges for this particular award—no juries, no experts—and, as always, it's intriguing to compare results with the Hugo and Nebula ballots, as well as with the readers' polls conducted by *Locus* and *SF Chronicle*. This year's winners, and runners-up, were:

NOVELLA

1. **OCEANIC, GREG EGAN**
2. The Summer Isles, Ian R. MacLeod
3. Sea Change, With Monsters, Paul J. McAuley
4. Ancestral Voices, Gardner Dozois & Michael Swanwick
5. A Question of Grammar, L. Timmel Duchamp (tie)
5. The Days of Solomon Gursky, Ian McDonald (tie)
6. Grist, Tony Daniel
7. Get Me to the Church on Time, Terry Bisson
8. Mother Death, Robert Reed

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

NOVELETTE

1. **ECHEA, KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH**
2. Taklamakan, Bruce Sterling
3. Starfall, R. Garcia y Robertson
4. Steamship Soldier on the Information Front, Nancy Kress
5. Approaching Perimelasma, Geoffrey A. Landis
6. Lovestory, James Patrick Kelly
7. Waiting for the End, Robert Silverberg
8. Down in the Dark, William Barton
9. The Eye of God, Mary Rosenblum
10. Crucifixion Variations, Lawrence Person

SHORT STORY

1. **RADIANT DOORS, MICHAEL SWANWICK**
2. The Stubbornest Broad on Earth, Janet Kagan
3. The Very Pulse of the Machine, Michael Swanwick (tie)
3. Archaic Planets: Nine Excerpts from the Encyclopedia Galactica, Michael Swanwick (with Sean Swanwick) (tie)
4. Through the Wall to Eggshell Lake, Danith McPherson
5. Radio Praha, Tony Daniel
6. Building the Building of the World, Robert Reed
7. Fruitcake Theory, James Patrick Kelly
8. Dante Dreams, Stephen Baxter
9. 17, Paul J. McAuley
10. The Game This Year, Lisa Goldstein (tie)
10. Scientifiction, Howard Waldrop (tie)

BEST POEM

1. **EGG HORROR POEM, LAUREL WINTER**
2. The Hunter's Mothers, Mary A. Turzillo
3. Curse of the SF Editor's Wife, Bruce Boston
4. Willy in the Nano-Lab, Geoffrey A. Landis
5. Gravity Drives the Blood and Bends the Light, Bruce Boston (tie)
5. Curse of the Super-Hero's Wife, Bruce Boston (tie)
5. The Genetic Engineer Throws a Cocktail Party and Drinks Too Much, Andy Duncan (tie)
5. Black Hole, Black Hole, Gregory W. Stewart (tie)
6. Recipe for a Planck Sandwich, Gregory W. Stewart
7. Human/Technological Dimensions on the Eve of the Bimillennium, Bruce Boston (tie)
7. November, Wendy Rathbone (tie)
8. Particle Resonance, David Lunde
9. Colonists, William John Watkins
10. Eating the Mystery, Robert Frazier & James Patrick Kelly

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

BEST COVER ARTIST

1. **JOHN FOSTER**
2. Bob Eggleton
3. Mike Carroll
4. Jim Burns
5. Gary L. Freeman
6. Wojtek Siudmak
7. Ron Walotsky
8. Joel Shabram

BEST INTERIOR ARTIST

1. **ALAN GIANA**
2. Darryl Elliot
3. Laurie Harden
4. Mark Evans
5. Steve Cavallo
6. George Krauter
7. Jeff Crosby
8. John Stevens
9. Jason Eckhardt (tie)
9. Beryl Bush (tie)
10. Kandis Elliot

As promised, all ballots were automatically entered in a drawing for a free one-year subscription to *Asimov's*. The winner of this year's drawing was R.K. Bernstein of San Francisco, California.

Both our Readers' Awards and *Analog's* Analytical Laboratory Awards were presented on May 1, 1999, during a breakfast at the Marriott Hotel Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in conjunction with SFWA's Nebula Banquet weekend. Each winner received a cash award and a certificate. Of the *Asimov's* winners, Kristine Kathryn Rusch and Laurel Winter were on hand to accept their Readers' Awards in person. Other notables present at breakfast included Connie Willis; Cordelia Willis; Dean Wesley Smith; Peter Heck; Allen Steele; Linda Steele; Catherine Asaro; Bob Eggleton; Mark Kelly; Bud Sparhawk; David Truesdale; Sheila Williams; Stanley Schmidt; Joyce Schmidt; Charles N. Brown, editor of Locus; Beth Gwinn, Locus photographer; and *Asimov's*/*Analog* publisher Peter Kanter. The Nebula Award Banquet was held later that evening, and later still, we partied on late into the night at the SFWA suite, until hotel security closed us down for making too much noise. ❍

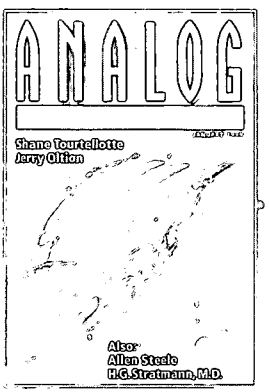
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

TOUR THE UNIVERSE

Just $6.95!

Save 60%

Explore the boundaries of imagination with the Analog Science Fiction Value Pack. You get five of our most popular back issues for just $6.95 plus shipping. That's a savings of 60% off the regular price!



Complete the order form below and mail it back to us with your payment today.

PENNY MARKETING

Dept. SM-100, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855-1220

☑ YES! Please send me my **Analog Science Fiction Value Pack**. I get 5 back issues for just $6.95 plus $2 shipping and handling ($8.95 per pack, U.S. funds). **My satisfaction is fully guaranteed!** My payment of $ _____ is enclosed.
(AFPK05)

Name: _____
(Please print)

Address: _____

City: _____

State: _____ **ZIP:** _____

Please make checks payable to Penny Marketing. Allow 8 weeks for delivery. Magazines are back issues shipped together in one package. To keep prices low we cannot make custom orders. Add $4 additional postage for delivery outside the U.S.A. Offer expires 6/30/00. 049C-NANVL1

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

James Patrick Kelly

SCI-FI

What's in a name?

In an essay entitled "Sci-fi TV" in the most recent Nebula collection (*Nebula Awards 33*, edited by Connie Willis, Harcourt Brace, 1999) veteran screen and SF writer Michael Cassutt begins thusly:

> *I know, I've already annoyed you by using that horrid term sci-fi in this dignified awards volume. Tough. Sci-fi has won the lexicological war, and in Hollywood, especially that giant suburb of Hollywood known as the television industry, sci-fi is the term of choice. And isn't sci-fi a more accurate name for what is offered on television than speculative fiction?*

Gak! I thought what *I* was writing was SF, but I believe Michael may be right. If you stop someone on the street and ask what kind of writing it is that has starships and virtual reality and robots and maybe time travel, and chances are very good indeed that she'll tell you it's sci-fi. When I was breaking into the field, sci-fi was a dirty word, an epithet that culture snobs used to put us down. Almost all the professionals in the field back then struggled to put distance between their literary enterprise and the light—and often silly—entertainment that was sci-fi. Now, it would appear that the struggle is over. Sci-fi has triumphed.

When did that happen?

Nostalgia

The first time I waited more than a couple or ten minutes to see a movie was in 1977. If memory serves, I stood in line for the better part of an hour for *Star Wars*. A couple of weeks later I played hooky from writing and saw it again at a Wednesday afternoon matinee. This time I was able to waltz right in, but by the time John Williams's bombastic score started to blare, the theater was almost full. I liked *Star Wars* a lot, both times I saw it, although it wasn't actually my favorite sci-fi flick of 1977. That was *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, and I had to wait in line to see *that* almost as long as for *Star Wars*. Both made a ton of money, and at the time I thought that was a Good Thing indeed, because, for all their flaws, they were science fiction movies—*our* movies. For the first time since *2001*, the mundane world got a good look at all the fun to be had in our little corner of popular culture. My recollection is that, even in the genre, people were taken aback by the runaway success of these movies. A few were disturbed. I was just the dewiest of new writers back then but I remember some of my SF—pardon, *sci-fi*—betters shaking their heads and muttering, "Well, maybe this will turn more people on to science fiction books."

On April 22, 1999, I did a decidedly non-scientific survey (look ma—no methodology!) of the web using

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the **Excite** (*http://www.excite.com*) search engine. I typed in the names of six fictional characters and recorded the number of hits each got. Here they are: Luke Skywalker: 8290 hits, Darth Vader: 5434 hits, Han Solo: 3020 hits, Miles Vorkosigan: 204 hits, Ender Wiggin: 76 hits, Paul Muad'Dib: 58 hits.

Miles Vorkosigan is, of course, a recurring character in those works of **Lois McMaster Bujold** (*http://www.herald.co.uk/~dendarii/*) that relate the history of the swashbuckling Vorkosigan family, Ender Wiggin is the hero of **Orson Scott Card's** (*http://www.hatrack.com/*) Ender sequence and Paul Muad'Dib stands at the center of **Frank Herbert's** (*http://duneworld.spaceguild.com/*) celebrated Dune books. Both Card and Bujold won back-to-back Hugos for books in their signature series; Herbert got but one Hugo out of *Dune*. These three are some of the most popular series characters created in the last forty years.

Oops! I guess I should qualify that. These are some of the most popular series characters *who originated in print*. Many, many more books have been sold limning the adventures of Messrs. Skywalker and Solo, not to mention Captains James Tiberius Kirk and Jean Luc Picard. The success of mega-franchises like Star Wars and Star Trek did indeed attract new readers, but not necessarily for science fiction books and stories.

What they wanted was sci-fi.

The Official Story

Let's take a tour of sci-fi on the net with visits to the official sites of these two shining Stars: Wars and Trek. It stands to reason that each of these franchises has the resources to create a truly boggling site, and, indeed, they do not disappoint the eye. All include what you would expect: plot summaries, character sketches and backstory, cast lists, jpgs of people and hardware. Both have stores where you can buy books, comics, games, tapes, trading cards, figurines, and the like. One invites fans to join the party, one ignores them. Interestingly enough, neither seems to have a links page, even though each has inspired literally thousands of fan sites. This may be because both are creatures of corporate masters and as such, do not stray too far from the safe precincts of merchandizing the product.

As I write this, the debut of *The Phantom Menace* is still a month away. Not surprisingly, it's *the* news on the **Star Wars** (*www.starwars.com*) site. On the index page there are behind-the-scenes articles about the making of the latest installment and earnest clarifications of LucasFilms draconian ticket policy. Moving on from the initial public relations broadsides, you'll find that the site has a subtle tendency to downplay the fact that it is about a series of movies. Many of the well-designed links present George Lucas's dream as if it actually existed; the web pages seem like the scenes of interactive documentary. For example, while it is possible to discover that the part of Obi-Wan Kenobi was played by Alec Guinness in the original movie, there is no biography of the great actor, while the character's background is extensively covered. I found it interesting that the Star Wars site makes no attempt at all to foster an online community of fans; I could locate neither a chat page nor a bulletin board. Perhaps the web version of the "galaxy, far, far away" needs to be protected from a prying fingers of the digerati so that it can continue to aspire to reality.

If you want to get the unofficial

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

story on Star Wars, start with **Links to the Star Wars Galaxy** (*www.shavenwookie.com/swlinks.html*). There's nothing fancy here, just 1500 alphabetized links to Star Wars sites from **A. J.'s STAR WARS Tribute Homepage** (*http://www.angelfire.com/fl/VELARDE/*) to **Zak Skywalker's Star Wars Page!** (*http://www.geocities.com/Area51/Zone/3694/*).

The **Star Trek Continuum** (http://*www.startrek.com*) is the more ambitious of the two official sites, but then the series travels with a lot of baggage. Star Trek Continuum is a five ring circus of a site, brassy and busy and unfortunately commercial. It is littered with ads that do little to promote a sense of wonder. For example, I tried to concentrate on the biography of William Shatner, except that at the bottom of the page a banner flashed in gold: *Wonderbra Supermodel . . . See her now on . . . Entertainment Tonight Online.* And when I wanted to read about the captain of the *Voyager,* I got a page entitled Kathryn Janeway™! Nevertheless, there are a lot of slick touches, like a daily Klingon vocabulary builder and an online role-playing game and a popup window called the PADD (Personal Access Display Device) that helps the visitor navigate through the sprawl of this huge site. To get to use most of these goodies, however, you have to join the Star Trek Continuum. Unlike the Star Wars site, Star Trek wants you! The site is crafted to make it easy to chat and post messages and listen to lectures and in general rub elbows with other trekkies. The problem is that Paramount, which owns the franchise, wants the Continuum to be your only source of Trek. It has harassed fans who've put up Trek sites of their own and has closed some down.

That's why you won't find a links page on the Continuum. If you seek more Trek on the web, click over to **Star Trek:WWW** (*http://www.stwww.com/*) which has every right to call itself the mother of all Star Trek sites. And while you're there, click on the Red Alert button to check out **The Online Freedom Federation** (*http://www.off-hq.org/*) where you can sign a petition to protest the way the suits at Paramount do business.

Strange

For a kinder, gentler and very different twist on sci-fi, try **Strange Fun** (*http://chaplin.pkbaseline.com/screen/strange/*). Strange fun isn't all that *strange* exactly, but it's quirky and definitely fun. The URL will take you to a preview screen which proclaims, "Yes these are truly bizarre times we live in. Aliens have infiltrated the government, your friends are androids, the food is synthetic, your girlfriend sleeps with her eyes open." Not only does Strange Fun have a delightful sense of humor but the art direction rocks. This is one of the most visually interesting sites I've visited in a while. There are trenchant reviews of current and recent movie releases, a more cursory look at television sci-fi, a few celeb biographies and some knowledgeable but not particularly penetrating essays on the various incarnations of Trek. Be sure to check out the House of Strange Stuff. It features several oddball pages of images, icons, and ads, including these money making opportunities: "RAISE GIANT FROGS" and "MONEY IN WORMS."

Exit

This is how Michael Cassutt concludes his essay "Sci-fi TV":

We love our novelettes in Asi-

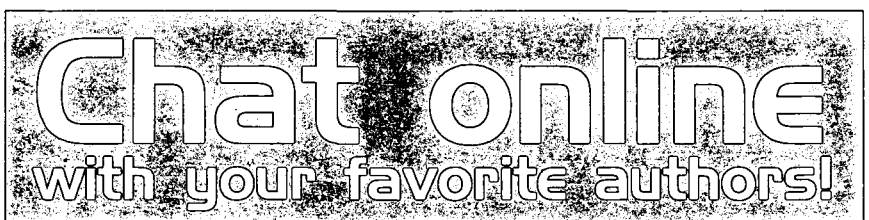
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

mov's *and our Nebula-winning stories and novels, but more and more the public face of science fiction belongs to . . . the masters of sci-fi TV.*

As much as I would like to deny this is true, I can't. Written SF no longer dominates the genre. The signs are all over the net. Here's one I missed until just recently, even though it was staring me right in the face. In an earlier column I commended **Sci-fi Wire** (*http://www.scifi.com/scifiwire/*) to your attention as a good source for breaking genre news stories. At the time I whined about its media bias. Let's take a closer look at that bias, shall we? When you click to the opening screen you'll get the top stories in the middle of the page. In the frame on the left side are links to "News Archived by Categories." Since the list is not in alphabetical order, I can only assume it is arranged in order of importance to the patrons of the site. Here's that order:

Television
Sci-fi Channel
Film
Internet
Unexplained
Fandom
Science
Print
Games
Toys

Hey, maybe *Asimov's* writers aren't as interesting as UFOs but at least we've got that Ensign Pavel Chekov™ figurine beat! O



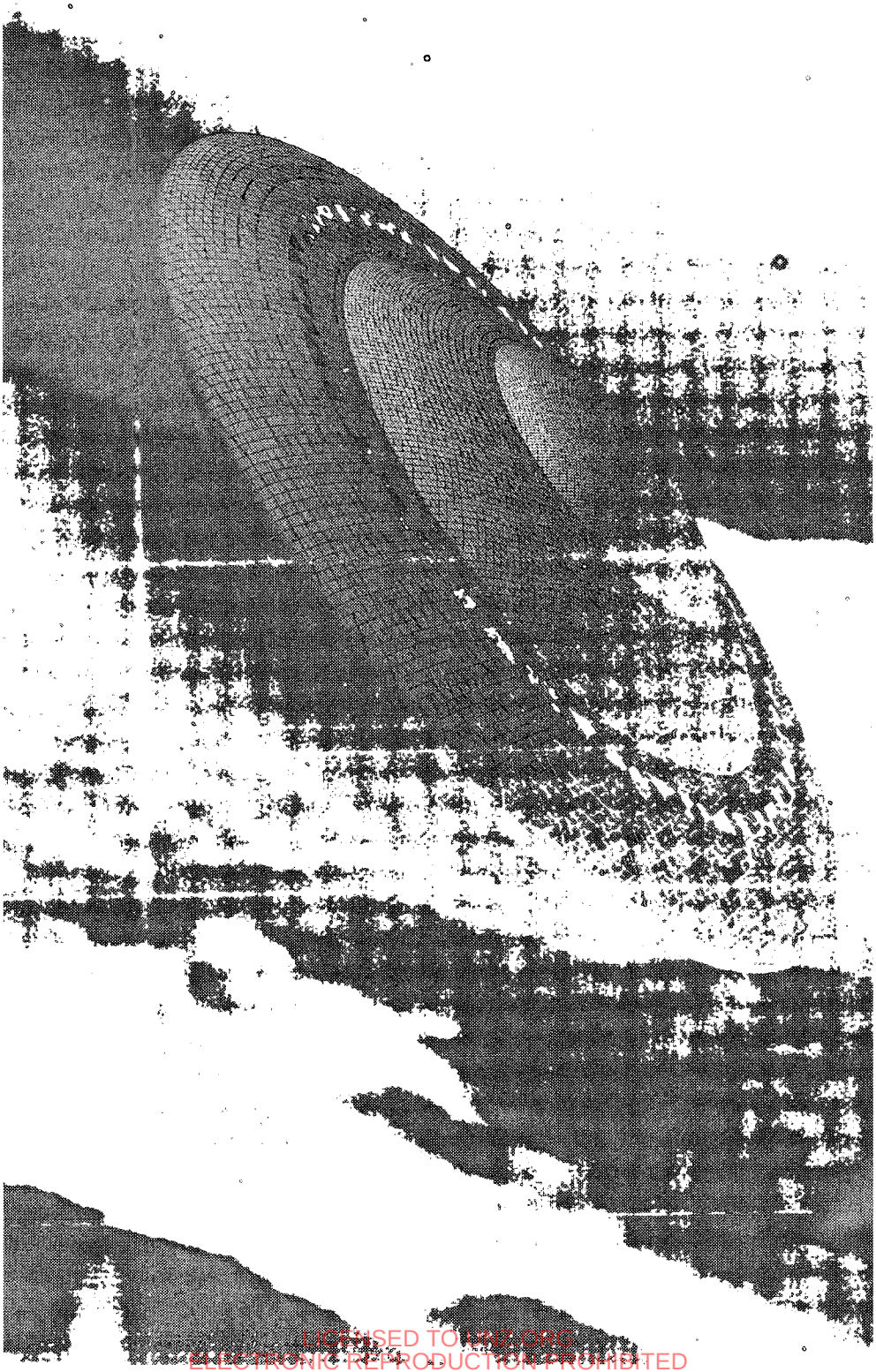
Analog's Hugo Finalists — August 10 @ 9:00 p.m. EST
Catherine Asaro, Michael A. Burstein, and Allen Steele

Australian Science Fiction — August 24 @ 9:00 p.m. EST
Jack Dann, Stephen Dedman, and Chris Lawson

Alternate History — September 14 @ 9:00 p.m. EST
with Harry Turtledove

Go to www.scifi.com/chat or link to the chats via our home page (www.asimovs.com). Chats are held in conjunction with *Analog* and the Sci-fi Channel and are moderated by *Asimov's* editor, Gardner Dozois.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



LICENSED TO MIT.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Robert Reed

NODAWAY

One of the author's most recent stories, "Whiptail" (*Asimov's*, October/November 1998), is currently a finalist for the Hugo award. In his latest tale, a young couple pays a visit to a sleepy little town that is known for its one stunning moment in history.

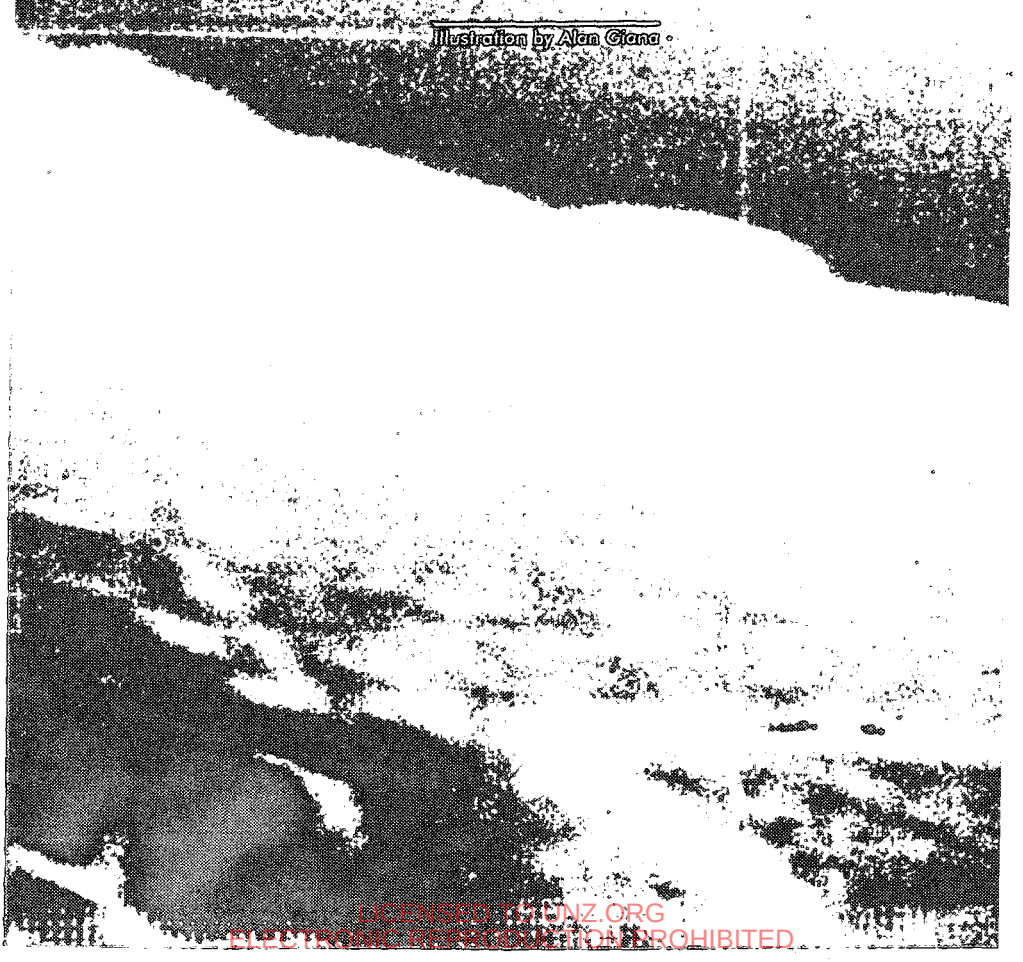


Illustration by Alan Giana

LICENSED TO LINZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Joseph is a smart man, and a sullen man, and skeptical. All qualities that Emma appreciates and accepts and finds intriguing, in that order. But he's also given to black moods and glowering silences, and twice during the past twenty years, he has plunged into a full-blown clinical depression.

He said as much on their first date.

Because it was the good and decent thing to do, he smiled sadly, then confessed to Emma, "I'll always have to eat my daily Prozac."

He plainly expected her to panic.

To bolt for the restaurant door.

But Joseph didn't know her. Emma doesn't abandon people. Certainly not for treatable medical conditions, she doesn't. Besides, he's usually a decent, captivating man, remarkable in many ways. There's even something appealing about his ugly black moods. Watching him, Emma finds in him a deep, profound quality. Yet in the same glance, hints of a delicious vulnerability. He loves to grouse and belittle and tease. He has a sharp, caustic wit and enjoys ravaging the fools who cross his path. Yet he's never belittled Emma, nor has he abandoned her in any fashion. For whatever peculiar reason, Joseph seems to appreciate qualities that he finds in her, and even if she doesn't see those qualities for herself, Emma's thrilled to have such a man in her otherwise routine life.

They had dated for six good months before she asked Joseph to come home with her for the holidays. An only child whose parents had passed on, he had nowhere else to go, and Christmas wasn't the time of year to be a depressive soul alone inside a little townhouse.

Yet even as she invited him, she somehow didn't expect him to nod and halfway smile like he did, telling her, "Sure, Emma. Why not?"

"Because my family is different," she told him. Pointblank.

"Everyone's is," he conceded.

"I mean, they're almost odd," she warned. "Clanish. With peculiar ideas, and strange little customs and rituals and such . . ."

"Like every other family," he assured.

Probably true, she thought. But that meant nothing, since every other family wasn't *her* family.

"Are you inviting me, or aren't you?" he asked.

"I am," she promised. "But remember. We're talking about *Nodaway County.*"

"Which means?"

"People there tend to be suspicious of outsiders," she explained.

"With good reason," Joseph replied. Believing that he understood.

"I don't mean people in general," she said.

"You mean your odd family—"

"They aren't, and I mean my father," she interrupted. "He can be downright strange with outsiders, if they give him half a reason."

That made Joseph pause.

Made him think.

"There's something that I've never quite told you," Emma admitted.

Joseph's eyes grew large, and with a small astonished voice, he asked, "Your father . . . why are we talking about . . . your father. . . ?"

Emma didn't say one word.

"Shit," said Joseph. Smiling now.

And it wasn't a little smile, either. He was suddenly beaming. Thrilled,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and beaming. And that expression was so different for him, and so unexpected, that it took Emma a full day to remember to finish her thought.

"I'm asking you," she said. "Don't bring up the subject of spaceships or aliens with my father. Please."

"You're not asking," Joseph pointed out. "You're begging."

"Fine," she said. "I'm begging you."

"I won't mention the crash again," he promised grudgingly.

Then in the next breath, he asked, "So what is the story, anyway. . . ?"

How worried is Emma?

Worried enough to feel sick, nearly. But she hides her mood with a sturdy smile and the occasional bout of small talk. It's Christmas Eve. The Thanksgiving blizzard has mostly melted, a full foot of snow turning thin and ugly and the drab brown ground emerging from the thinnest spots. This has never been rich country for farmers. The gray winter skies match the shabbiness of the farmsteads. The cities and towns seem to grow smaller and poorer as they move south. Storefronts have a bleak, exhausted look. Houses are often for sale, and more than a few stand abandoned. If it wasn't for the occasional Wal-Mart choked with last-minute shoppers, a person would be excused for believing that some plague or invasion must have swept away most of the people.

They eat a late lunch at the Hardee's in Cedar City.

At least Joseph eats, complaining about his roast beef sandwich even as he wolfs it down. Emma picks at her chicken and pretends to read someone's left-behind *USA Today,* then vanishes into the restroom to give her smiling face a little help.

Ten miles due south, they arrive at a little green sign telling them and the world that they've just entered Nodaway County.

A second sign stands back from the old highway.

An historic marker, she realizes. Someone must have erected it in the last six or eight months.

"Want to stop?" she inquires.

Joseph has a handsome profile. Whenever he's bored, his dark eyes acquire a sense of comfortable misery, and his little mouth has a bewitching way of appearing skeptical about everything that the eyes see.

"Why not?" he says.

Emma brakes late, then skids across the sloppy gravel drive.

Joseph looks off into the distance, and laughs.

She reddens, saying nothing.

The marker is a bronze plate bolted to a thick limestone spire. On it, in a simplified form, is an account of the only important event to ever occur inside her home county.

On the evening of July 4, 1947, she reads, *a deputy sheriff named Travis Bins stood at this site, preparing to issue a speeding ticket. A sudden flash of blue light caught his attention, and glancing up, he saw an object plunging from the night sky. The mysterious object maneuvered briefly, then crashed into an isolated woodlot seventeen miles to the south and east. Deputy Sheriff Bins reached the site thirty minutes later. Most authorities credit him with being first to discover the Nodaway starship.*

—This marker is supplied courtesy of the Nodaway Historical Commission. July 4, 1997.

* * *

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Lawson clan waits in the kitchen, ready to ambush them.

Brace and Angel sit at opposite ends of the breakfast table, playing cards and biting the heads off gingerbread men. Their wives stand beside the stove, helping with dinner when they aren't fussing over newborns. Mom is a whirlwind of happy noise and frantic motions. While Father sits at the table with his sons, his back to the door, carefully setting down his cards before rising and turning to face them, the ruddy old face not quite smiling, or anything, as he stares at the new man in his daughter's life.

The scene that Emma has imagined for weeks, and feared, passes in an instant, without incident or apparent significance. Her introductions prove quick and painless. Little nods and polite little grins serve as handshakes. Everyone is on their best behavior. Except for the older nieces and nephews who suddenly charge into the kitchen, emitting piercing, full-throated wails of joy.

Over that roar, Joseph tells everyone, "I'm glad to meet you."

"Slow down!" Brace shouts at his oldest.

The eight-year-old takes that advice for a half-instant, but as the adults' attention wavers, he bends low and races for the dining room.

Emma is happy, and tense. And she's both relieved and offended when Father decides to sit again, contributing nothing to the small talk.

Mom insists on giving their guest the grand tour.

Emma insists on hovering nearby.

"This is the old part of the house," Mom begins. Then she has to giggle, adding, "As if there's anything young about any of it."

Joseph says nothing.

Mom continues, explaining, "Emma's great-great-great grandfather homesteaded this quarter section. He built a sodhouse where we're standing. After he got out of the Army, right after the Civil War."

Joseph says, "Huh."

Mom touches the kitchen wall, adding, "The sod's still here, buried under this plaster. Isn't that right, Tom?"

Father shrugs his shoulders.

"Which is why it's so nice and warm in here," Mom adds.

By contrast, the dining room is chilly. The children have gathered around and under the table. The table still needs its leaves, and plates, and silverware.

But Emma doesn't have the time to take charge. They pass into the living room. Grandma Lawson sits alone, covered with an old quilt, looking tiny on the big overstuffed chair. Dim green eyes are half-open. Is she napping or awake? Then the eyes blink, and a smiling voice says, "Hello, Emma. And how are you, Stephen?"

Stephen was her last boyfriend.

The embarrassment is quick and endurable. But Mom has to keep things stirred, blurting, "No, Mother Lawson. This is Joseph. *Joseph*. This is Emma's *new* manfriend!"

Grandma halfway nods, then pretends to drift off.

Mom turns to Joseph, explaining, "She's practically ninety."

"Sure," Joseph allows. "I understand."

Joseph barely resembles Stephen. At least, Emma never noticed any resemblance. Until now . . . a new, unexpected dread closing on her throat . . .

Mom's folks are in the den, the television turned to one of the Kansas City stations. Grandma introduces herself and Grandpa, and Grandpa

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

stares past everyone, his clouded eyes seeing nothing but swirling, humanoid shapes.

"Joseph Patterson?" he repeats. "Are you one of the Cedar City Pattersons?"

"I don't think so," Joseph confesses.

"Good," says Grandpa. "They're nothing but cheats and snobs, so far as I'm concerned. . . !"

Emma breathes.

And breathes again.

Mom opens the adjacent door.

The staircase is steep, its tall walls covered with framed photographs of children and grandchildren. "The Hall of Shame," Emma mutters, trying to laugh. Photographs of herself show a puffy, insecure child who won't look at the camera. Her brothers, by contrast, are nothing but confident, wearing jeans and white T-shirts and crewcuts and devilish grins. Joseph lingers over a picture of Brace holding the limp body of a coyote, hands clamped around the animal's back legs, a proud bright happy smile looking across twenty years.

Joseph probably hates the idea of trapping.

Probably.

But when you date someone for barely six months, and sleep with him only on weekends and special occasions . . . well, there isn't much occasion to discuss views about steel traps and the fur industry. . . .

Joseph glances down at Emma, for a moment.

What does *that* expression mean?

Bless her, Mom urges everyone up the steep stairs. The temperature drops twenty degrees in ten feet. Old farmhouses can look awfully quaint when you're driving past them on the road, but they leak wind and heat in the winter, leaving the bedrooms in a perpetual Arctic chill.

"This was Emma's room," says Mom.

Joseph says, "Huh."

The room is essentially unchanged. The same bed hangs suspended from the ceiling by toggle hooks. The same old chest of drawers and shaggy throw rugs and odd pink paint set a late-adolescent mood.

"It was her idea," Mom admits. "The bed, I mean."

Joseph touches one of the heavy chains, then pushes gently, causing the bed to rock slowly back and forth.

"She saw it in a magazine," Mom reports, "and begged for one of her own. Her father finally made it for her as a Christmas gift. When she was sixteen." She shakes her head, almost laughing. "Emma hated the rocking so much that she ended up, more often than not, sleeping on the floor."

Emma watches Joseph. Because he's the sort of man who might say anything, she fortifies herself. But before he can offer his snide observation, heavy feet come marching upstairs.

"I've got to run home quick," says Brace. "We need diapers."

He isn't talking to Mom, or Emma. He's looking straight at Joseph, his smiling expression either curious or nosy. Depending.

"Want to ride along?" Brace inquires. "We can take your luggage, if you want."

They'll stay the night at her brother's. For a lot of good reasons, it's easier than sleeping under her parents' roof.

Joseph says, "Sure," and gives the bed a last little push. "Why not?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

* * *

Emma sits against the passenger door, feeling forgotten.

It's barely three o'clock, but the skies have darkened. Fresh flurries drift low, then seem to reconsider, a faint wind lifting them back toward the clouds again.

At the bottom of a long hill, Brace slows, looking up a wooded draw.

"Hunting for coyotes?" Joseph asks.

"Probably not," Brace replies.

"Do you still trap them?" Joseph presses.

"Gave it up," her brother admits. "Ages ago, it seems like."

Her brother lives a couple miles to the north. And no, he doesn't run traplines anymore. Or hunt. Or even fish. He helps Father with the farm, which is full time work, and he's got his own half-section to worry about. What he does for relaxation, he usually says, is sleep. Five fat hours of sleep every night, whether he needs it or not.

The gravel road lifts to a windy crest, then drops into the next drainage.

Brace downshifts and watches both sides of the road, remarking, "So you're a scientist, I hear."

Brace knows exactly what Joseph is.

"A biologist," Joseph replies. "I teach at the University."

Her brother brakes as they roll out onto a small wooden bridge, then makes a show of looking downstream, staring toward the east.

"This isn't the best time to see them," he remarks.

"See who?" Joseph has to ask.

"The cougars," Brace says.

Emma stares out into the weakly falling snow, feeling uneasy, remembering a phone call where she repeated some of Joseph's funny observations to Mom. She must have repeated at least one of them to Father. And Father could have mentioned it to Brace, in passing.

"Cougars," Joseph repeats.

"Oh, yeah," says her brother. With confidence.

Joseph gives a little snort, then says, "I've heard stories. Last year, I had a student from down here. He swore that he saw a female and her two cubs in a corn field."

"Oh, I've seen that girl, too," says Brace. He watches Joseph, then shifts and starts them moving again.

"This isn't Colorado," says Joseph.

Brace laughs, sort of. Then he says, "Yeah, I can read a license plate."

Joseph says nothing for a long moment. Then he asks, "How many times have you seen those bobcats?"

"Cougars," Brace corrects him. "And not more than a dozen times."

Joseph glances at Emma.

"He's testing you," she doesn't say. Except maybe with her eyes.

Then Brace gives a big, don't-give-a-shit laugh, saying, "I guess you don't believe in the big cats. Is that what you're saying?"

"People see a lot of things," is Joseph's assessment.

"They do," Brace agrees.

"What I think," Joseph concludes, "is that believing that you saw something never makes it become real."

"Sorry," says her brother.

Then talking mostly to himself, Brace says, "I was just looking anyway. Just looking. Just having a little fun."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

* * *

Emma remembers when there wasn't such thing as *the crash.* When she was a little girl, Nodaway was a quiet, out of the way world that no one could find on a map. Except for the people who happened to be living here, that is.

Then it was late '69, and she must have been what. . . ? Eight years old. And Walter Cronkite was on television, talking about secret documents that some government worker had passed to the press. The source didn't approve of the war in Vietnam, or he hated Nixon, or he was simply angry about being passed over for a promotion. It depends on what version you chose to believe. Whatever the reasons, the contents of those secret papers began to leak out to the public.

The papers claimed that shortly after World War II, an alien spacecraft crashed in the middle of Nodaway County.

The deputy was first at the crash site. It was Travis Bins who realized this wasn't anyone's lost bomber. Through his radio and the county dispatcher, he contacted the air base in Lincoln, telling them that some strange kind of UFO was down. And he was still there, watching the rubble cool and keeping the few bystanders back, when the military men arrived—a couple carloads of officers with enough smarts to understand this wasn't any bird of theirs, or the Soviets, or anything else human, and that they'd better button up the area and do nothing until more help could arrive.

For a full day, chaos ruled. There wasn't any manual explaining how to deal with a downed craft of unknown capacities and imprecise dangers. Procedures had to be invented from scratch. Because it was obvious and relatively easy to accomplish, the military closed down that portion of the county. Because it might be important later, thousands of photographs were taken of the wreckage. Then the alien crew, all dead, were stuffed into numbered sacks, and the strange, apparently broken machinery was wrestled into the backs of heavy trucks and carted away.

To where, nobody seemed to know.

The secret documents only described the crash site in cursory detail, then spent most of their officious pages describing how FBI teams, that day and for the next several years, dealt with the seven civilian witnesses.

An experimental Air Force bomber had crashed. That was the official, well-rehearsed rumor that Travis and other witnesses were allowed to overhear. The bomber had been carrying an atomic weapon, and there was a contamination problem. Which explained why the crash site had to be condemned and cordoned off, and why every physical trace of the event was dug up and carted away.

Witnesses were warned and warned again not to discuss anything that they might have seen, or thought they saw.

For the sake of their country.

And democracy.

And their immortal souls, too.

Local phone lines were bugged. Three cafés and the Nodaway American Legion Hall were equipped with hidden microphones. On at least two occasions, the FBI made follow-up visits to remind witnesses about their duties. One cryptic note, dated January '55, mentioned "trouble with TB." Then in March, on a clear dry evening, Travis Bins lost control of his cruiser, rolling four times before his shattered vehicle and body came to rest against a giant elm.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Eight-year-old children rarely grasp the finer points in conspiracies.

Or even the coarser ones.

To Emma, the only comprehensible detail was that a spaceship had fallen on top of them. It was as exciting as Armstrong dancing on the moon, only it had happened practically outside their front door.

According to Walter Cronkite, that is.

The Lawsons owned a massive old black-and-white television. She would lie on the floor, and her father always sat on his Lay-Z-Boy, always looking tired after a full day's work. He watched the news without making any sound. At least she can't remember any comment. But she remembers her confusion when the President called a news conference, his gravely and disgusted voice telling America, "These documents are nothing. Nothing but lies. No extraterrestrial ships have crashed. Project Moonchild is nothing but a disinformation operation. It was, and is, nothing but a carefully staged event, and it was done so that news of it would eventually find its way to our competitors.

"The hope," said President Nixon, "was that other powers would respect our nation all the more, believing that we had a spacecraft in our possession."

Hearing that, Emma turned and asked her silent father, "Is that true?"

Father continued saying nothing.

She remembers.

But she pressed him, asking, "Did something crash, or didn't it?"

Father put a fist to his mouth and cleared his throat. She remembers. Then he told her, and himself, "If our President says it never happened, then it didn't. And that's all you need to know about that."

Brace and his family live at the old Shoemaker place. It was a kit-house, purchased during the Great War, shipped to Nodaway City by train, then carried to this hilltop by wagons, and assembled. An old maid named Gertrude Shoemaker was born upstairs and lived every day of her seventy-six-year life inside its heavy walls. Alone, mostly. Three years ago, she was found dead in the living room, and, recognizing a good deal, Brace bought the dilapidated house for three thousand dollars and a third-hand truck.

Nobody knows when poor Gertrude lost her sanity.

She raised rabbits for money and for food. In her last years, the rabbits claimed the house for themselves. Despite Brace's energy and his wife's stubbornness, the rabbits remain. They're an odor at the back of the nose, a soft shuffling of unseen feet. Standing in the living room, inches from where Gertrude died, Emma puts down her little overnight bag and waits while her brother searches the house for diapers. Pointing to the dark oak window frames, she says, "Look." Incisors have chewed notches in the wood. Deep. Ugly. Unrepairable. Emma tells Joseph about the old woman, in brief, horror mixed with an easy pity. Then she feels an eerie shiver building, imagining dozens and hundreds of soft white rabbits, pink eyes gleaming as they try to gnaw their way to freedom.

Joseph touches the chewed wood, then looks across the countryside.

"Does he really mean it?" he asks suddenly.

"Mean what?"

"About the cougars," he says. Then he glances at her, genuinely puzzled. "Or was he playing a game? Like hunting snipe is a game. . . ?"

"But cougars are real," she offers.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Snipe are real," he replies.

"Are they?"

"Snipe are a shorebird," he explains. "And a pretty common one, at that."

She shakes her head, admitting, "Almost everyone in our family's seen a mountain lion. At least once."

"You?"

She says, "No."

Then she confesses, "I may have started this. You once told me about that student of yours . . . the one from Cedar City . . ."

"Yeah?"

"It was funny," she admits. "Whatever you said about that boy, it made me laugh, and I think it got Mom to laugh, too."

Joseph sighs, and shrugs his shoulders, and says nothing.

Floorboards creak directly above them. Then the stairs moan, and Brace reappears, a fat package of Pampers stuffed under one arm. "Ready to go?" he asks.

They follow him to his pickup.

"It's not much of a house," her brother confesses. "But in another twenty years, come see it."

"Maybe I will," says Joseph.

The next drive is quick and quiet. They don't slow for cougars, this time. Indifferent flurries have turned into a steady snow, and the short walk from the pickup to her folks' kitchen leaves them a little white, then a little damp.

Only Mom and Angel's wife are in the kitchen. Most of the adults have crowded into the den, watching Jimmy Stewart plunging through fake snow, while the children have been ordered, or bribed, into climbing upstairs to play halfway quietly.

Emma should help Mom, but she doesn't want to abandon Joseph.

What she does is trade off. For a few minutes, she stirs gravy and bastes the turkey. Then she drifts into the den to count who wants milk with supper, who wants water. Poor Joseph has been sandwiched between Mom's folks. Grandma French votes last, voting for water, then hands Joseph a full tray of walnuts. "From our own trees," she boasts.

Emma nearly warns him. But what can she say without hurting feelings? She simply holds her breath as Joseph takes a big pinch of nut meat and bites down, and he winces, eyes wide in pain. Then he glances at the white-haired woman beside him, an expression of simple horror on his miserable face.

Everyone else laughs quietly. Knowingly.

"How do you shell your walnuts?" Angel prompts. "Huh, Grandpa?"

The blind man grins and pats himself on the knee. "I set them out on our driveway," he explains proudly, "and then I back our Buick right over them."

"Does it work?" asks her youngest brother.

"Neat and easy," is the old man's assessment.

Joseph pulls the offending shard or chunk of gravel from his mouth, then sets the tray aside, throwing Emma an injured look.

She retreats to set the dining room table.

Later, when it's finally time to eat, she returns to find her baby brother talking to Joseph with a quiet, rational voice. For a slippery instant, that seems like good news. Emma can almost imagine the two becoming friends. But then she hears Angel's words, and a sinking feeling takes hold of her.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Mad-cow disease," says Angel. "It began as a bioweapon. The Pentagon built the first prions back in the sixties, then gave them to the British. . . ."

"Who used them on their own people?" Joseph asks, perplexed.

"No, no. *That* was a mistake," Angel explains. "But prions are tiny things."

"Subversive proteins," Joseph offers.

"Exactly! Which is how they escaped into the food chain."

Joseph waits a half-moment, then has to ask, "How do you know this?"

"Dinner's ready," Emma interrupts.

"The proof's on the Web," her brother claims. "I know a bunch of honest sites, if you'd like to look for yourself."

Joseph says nothing.

Does nothing.

People are climbing to their feet, stretching stiff backs and necks. But not Angel, and not her Joseph.

"That airliner that went down off Long Island?" Angel persists. "It wasn't a spark in the fuel tank that did it. It was a bomb. Don't let them fool you."

"I try not to let them," says Joseph.

"Remember those AIDS doctors who were onboard?" Angel reminds him. "They're why the plane was bombed. They had to be killed."

"Had to be?"

"Because they knew what AIDS is."

"And that is. . . ?"

"It's a genocide weapon. Aimed straight at the Third World."

Joseph stares at Angel. Is this another game? he's asking himself. Finally, he sighs and shrugs, asking, "Is that what happened?"

"Oh, yeah," says Angel. "That's pretty much common knowledge."

"Huh," says Joseph.

Angel just smiles, and smiles. Emma can't decide what her little brother believes and how much of it is laughing gas.

Again, she blurts, "Supper's ready."

Joseph looks at her. He has a sick expression made worse by his sick little smile. But he laughs out loud, still sitting when everyone else is standing, telling Emma, "Your brother here . . . I guess he needs to set me straight on a few things. . . ."

As Emma grew up, what had never happened in Nodaway County gradually and inexorably became something real.

The civilian witnesses never spoke to the press.

Travis Bins was dead, as were the old farmers living near the crash site. Only the local liars and bigmouths talked to the waves of reporters who came charging through Nodaway that first time.

In the end, it was the old military men who talked first, and talked best. For every sort of reason, they would step forward and break old vows, telling what they had seen and what they had done and what they knew as dense hard uncompromising fact.

A retired Air Force general, dying of lung cancer, confessed to *Sixty Minutes* that he had been in charge of Operation Moonchild. His interview was long and thorough, sprinkled with telling details, and more important, a lot of substantial and boring particulars. Moonchild was ad hoc and sloppy, he confessed. There wasn't any government agency ready for aliens to fall from the sky. With a raspy, dead-man voice, he told about getting conflicting orders from Washington and his own base. In a single hour, he was told to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

evacuate the area and to stay there no matter what, to keep a low profile and use every MP at his disposal, and he was ordered to bury the ship where it lay, and to pack up its pieces and take them away to at least a dozen different locations.

Even on the second day, when all the distant voices finally sang in the same key, they couldn't agree where the spaceship should end up. The Air Force and FBI and Executive Branch and the newborn CIA were each fighting for some share of the treasure.

For three days, four fully loaded trucks drove a bug's path across the countryside. East, first. Then south almost to Alabama. Then west to Texas, and back east again. Then Truman, or someone, made the final decision, and the general was relieved of command, and with a new crew manning the unmarked trucks, the spaceship was shipped west again. Bound for Los Alamos, someone told him in passing. But of course that might have been the truth, or might have been the official lie.

"Wherever that ship is today," wheezed the old general, "idiots have it."

"And how do you know that?"

"Because we aren't flying starships now, are we?" He coughed out of rage, then breathlessly explained, "We haven't learned *bleep* from it! Which means that ship's still sitting in a warehouse, forgotten. And that doesn't help my country one damned bit!"

"Is that why you're stepping forward now, General?"

"For the good of America!" boomed the dying man. "The country I love!"

The broadcast was followed by a good old-fashioned public outcry, and every motel room in the county was rented to reporters and the ilk.

For about a week, it lasted.

President Ford denied the entire story. He repeated the cover story about Operation Moonchild being designed to mislead the Russians. But he wasn't the liar Nixon was, and more than anything, he seemed embarrassed by the whole ugly business.

A year later, when Emma was a high school sophomore, three retired physicists called a press conference. The government tried to muzzle them, threatening them with treason and bringing in a brigade of FBI agents. But somewhere in the highest offices, someone's will failed them. The press conference went ahead as scheduled, and after another chaotic week, talk of treason was quietly squelched.

The white-haired PhDs confessed that they worked for years with pieces of an alien spacecraft.

And nothing was learned.

Whatever these creatures might have been, and whatever technologies they were using, the wreckage had proved too complex or too badly damaged to relinquish any of its secrets.

Emma watched the news conference in the den, her complex, badly damaged algebra spread out on the floor in front of her.

"Why step forward now?" one reporter asked.

"The world deserves to know," each man replied, in his own words. "The rest of that ship is somewhere, and a dead crew, and we can't trust the military to have total control over these treasures. . . !"

Carter won that next election.

Some claimed that Ford lost because he lied to Americans; others said it didn't make any difference.

However he got into the White House, one of Carter's first acts was to ad-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

mit publicly and officially that the United States had possession of a downed alien craft and its dead passengers, and that despite intensive work stretching back over three decades, very little had been learned.

To slake public interest, a few doctored photographs of the crash site were leaked. And again, reporters and cameramen descended on Nodaway County, and a parade of sightseers from as far away as Dallas drove up to have a look at Louis' Woods. A parade that nearly drove Louis' sons crazy, since the last thing you need is hundreds of strangers climbing your fences and leaving your gates open wide.

Gradually, the uproar died back.

Over the next few years, more and better photographs were leaked to the press, as well as a variety of classified reports.

Then came Reagan and his public declaration that America had been given the spaceship for a reason. It was a gift, plainly. "And it is America's sacred duty to use this wondrous machine," he said in his first State-of-the-Union address. "With this gift from God," he promised, "we will soon, very soon, gain the golden keys to the universe."

Nobody knows how much was spent on the Keys-to-the-Stars program.

A hundred billion dollars, at least.

But by the end of the '80s, dozens of embarrassed agencies paraded in front of Congress, admitting that the machinery was still beyond human comprehension . . . but if they could have another hundred billion dollars, and another ten or twenty years . . .

Keys-to-the-Stars was always a military operation.

The Soviets, knowing full well that they would be the targets of these wonder technologies, spent their own billions preparing for an invasion of flying saucers. And the result was their total bankruptcy and the collapse of their government, the sudden death of the Cold War, and the beginning of a different world order . . .

Studies continued into the '90s, but at a lower pitch.

Then a few years ago, without fanfare, the Clinton administration declassified most of the old secrets, including a comprehensive list of several hundred witnesses, including the seven civilians.

Father cuts the turkey, as always.

Watching him, watching his battered big farmer hands and sun-etched face and the long perfectly-bald head, Emma feels a pleasant astonishment to realize that her father has turned into an old man.

The adults' table feels crowded. Warm in pleasant ways, and otherwise. The children are eating in the kitchen, which isn't far enough away. If this house has ever been noisier, Emma can't remember it. She sits with Joseph on her left and Father on his left, and sometime after the platters have each made their circuit and the turkey's been halfway cleaned of its flesh, she realizes that Joseph is watching her father. Just watching him. She can practically see him not asking what he wants so badly to ask.

When Father talks, he looks at Angel.

"How's that new job of yours?" he wonders aloud.

"Fine enough," says Angel.

"What is it you're doing for them?"

Angel lives in Kansas City, working for banks that have troubles with their computers. Given this opportunity, he happily describes his current project, every sentence thick with a technical language no one else under-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

stands, his tone self-congratulatory, like the voice of a wizard describing how he can make broomsticks walk.

Father tries to listen. But when his younger son finishes, he seems relieved, turning to Brace now, asking, "Did you have a look at that grinder?"

"Yesterday," says Brace. "And I bought it."

"How much?"

"What we talked about. Minus a hundred."

Father nods. Smiles, just a little bit. Then he asks Brace some dense question about their cultivator's sickly transmission.

Farmers have their own technical gibberish. Emma grew up at this table, yet she can barely follow the flow of their conversation. Various transmissions are discussed, and the new tractor, and a certain troubled heifer, and a dozen other dense topics that are of consuming interest to both men.

Eventually they're done talking, and Father has no choice.

Intensely shy by nature, he finds himself watching his daughter's new friend, a look of simple duty coming into his face. After an uncomfortable moment, he decides on his first question. One of his heavy hands covers his mouth, and he coughs once, softly, before wondering aloud, "So what kind of biology do you teach?"

"General biology, mostly," says Joseph.

Father waits, giving the tiniest of nods.

Joseph smiles with a rare nervousness, then adds, "Most of my students are incoming freshmen."

"You like that, do you? Teaching?"

"Yes," says Joseph. "Most of the time, sir."

"Well," Father says, "if it pays the bills . . . and it doesn't hurt too much . . ."

His voice trails away. Both men have finished eating, and they spend a few moments squirming against their hard chairs.

That's when Joseph makes his decision. Despite Emma's begging, he decides to ask what he wants to ask. She can see it in his face and how he leans forward, his mouth open, the words ready to emerge. But just then she glances down the long table, and in a moment of sweet inspiration, blurts:

"Joseph! Would you help Grandma Lawson? She wants to go back to her chair. Would you do that for me, please?"

"Are there two Thomas Lawsons?" Emma asked her mother.

"What do you mean, dear?"

This was two and a half years ago. They were talking on the phone, Emma reading aloud portions of the article in the morning paper. The names of the seven civilian witnesses had been released, including someone named Thomas Lawson. "Is this a mistake," she asked, "or is this one of his cousins?"

Silence.

"You've always known," said Emma. "Haven't you?"

Her mother took a deep breath, then with the tone of grateful confession admitted, "Since our wedding night. Yes."

It wasn't just seeing her father on the list. No, what surprised Emma almost as much was her own emotions. She felt cheated somehow. Cheated, and foolish, and astonishingly angry.

"Can I talk to him?" she asked.

"No. He's already out in the field, darling."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"With Brace?"

"Sure. They're doing their planting."

"Does my brother know about the ship?"

Mom heard the jealousy, and sighing heavily, she said, "By tonight, I suppose someone will have to tell him. Yes."

"Father lied to me," Emma spat.

"No," Mom said firmly. Without patience. "What he was doing was protecting his family."

"Protecting us from what?"

"Darling—"

"From the government? Did the FBI, or someone, threaten him. . . ?"

There was a pause. Then Mom seemed to whisper, "No."

"Was that deputy, Travis Bins . . . was he murdered because he was telling people too much. . . ?"

"Probably not," Mom allowed.

"You're sure?"

"Travis drank," she warned Emma. "And frankly, he wasn't much of a driver when he was sober."

"So what was Father thinking?"

"It was right after World War II, and he was being a good loyal American." Mom said that as if nothing else needed to be said. But after a thoughtful pause, she added, "And besides. He promised that Air Force general that he would keep the secret."

"Is that what Father told you?" Emma snarled.

"And I kept the secret," Mom replied, not hearing the accusation.

Emma didn't know what to say.

"What if he had told you everything?" Mom continued. "Then he would have had to tell your brothers, too. To be fair. And one of you would have boasted about it to a friend or one of your cousins, and we would have ended up with a yard full of reporters and cameras, and the entire world would have learned that your father . . . a man who takes enormous pride in his reputation . . . can't be trusted to keep his simple word . . ."

Joseph holds Grandma Lawson by an elbow, and after she sits again, he settles on the sofa beside her. They're as close as they can be, and the two of them seem to be carrying on a conversation.

"Stephen," Grandma calls him.

Emma bristles but decides to help clear the table.

Eventually one of the old family albums has been pulled from its hiding place, and Joseph turns the stiff pages with a delicious slowness, pointing at photographs, asking little questions.

Mom sends Emma out to ask who wants pie, who wants coffee.

"This good-looking man is my father," Grandma says. "And this is my brother. And this little girl is me."

"Where is this?" asks Joseph.

"Barrow," says Grandma.

"In Alaska?"

"Oh, yes."

Joseph gives a soft little snort.

"During the Great War," she admits.

Emma smiles, and hovers.

"My father was a missionary working with the natives," Grandma ex-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

plains. "For three years, we lived in Barrow. We came by boat from Anchorage, during the summer when the ice wasn't so awful, and that's how we went back again. In the summer. By boat."

"What's this?" Joseph asks, pointing at an indoor scene.

"Our living room," Grandma explains. "The window, here, had three panes of glass to keep the cold out. Can you see the faces behind it?"

Joseph says, "Barely, yes."

"The natives found us to be very mysterious, and fascinating," she explains. "They would stand in the darkness, in that piercing cold, just to watch us go about our ordinary lives."

"Really?"

Grandma nods, tapping the photograph with a simple fondness. "I guess our lives must have seemed wonderfully strange to them. And we didn't mind it at all. Having an audience, I mean. When it was bedtime, my father would stand and open his watch. Which was the signal. And our friends would turn and walk off into the night."

Joseph doesn't know what to say.

Grandma turns the page. A crooked, nearly crippled finger points. "The natives watched for whales and ships from this old ship mast."

"Did they?"

"I climbed that pole once," she says, with pride.

"Did you?"

"With my brother prompting me, yes."

Emma remembers when she first heard these stories, and looking at that tall gray pole set against the gray Arctic sky, she recalls trying to imagine how it would be to make such a long climb for herself, one of her brothers following her up the very narrow ladder, urging her to ignore her fears, to keep her head down and her limbs moving.

"He told me that it wasn't much farther," says Grandma. "He kept promising that we were almost to the top."

"And you made it," says Joseph.

"Eventually," she says. "Because of my brother."

"What was the view like?"

She hesitates, then smiles in a thin, embarrassed fashion. "I don't know. The only part that I remember, frankly, is the climb."

Joseph laughs quietly.

Then she says, "My brother was quite the daredevil. Always."

"Was he?"

"Some years later, when he was a young man, he became a barnstormer. Do you know what they were, Stephen?"

Joseph says, "The fliers. Yes."

"That's how he died," she confesses. "He was flying too low, and he touched a telephone line. He wasn't twenty-five years old, and it's been all these years, and I still think about him every day."

The old pain is still fresh on her face.

Joseph glances up at Emma, speaking with his eyes.

Emma pats her grandmother on her shoulder and asks about pie and coffee. Joseph wants both, please, and Grandma doesn't seem to hear the question. Emma returns to the kitchen and helps dish up the narrow slices of warm pumpkin pie, bringing out two plates at a time. When she returns to Joseph, the album has been closed. Grandma Lawson tilts her head, listening carefully to whatever her companion is saying. Or she's fallen asleep

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

again. But as Emma steps close, the old woman straightens as much as possible, and brightens, and she says, "Well, if you're interested, my son was there. Tom saw *everything*."

Emma feels a sudden weakness.

"Did you know? Tom was the boy driving that car," says Grandma. "The one that Deputy Bins stopped for driving too fast."

Joseph glances up Emma, smiling with a thin guilt.

She pats Joseph fondly on the knee, telling him, "I'll have him talk to you about it. If you're interested, I mean."

"I am," Joseph confesses.

Then he thinks to ask, "But what if he doesn't want to talk about it?"

"Now Stephen. . . !" she declares.

Then she looks up and finds Emma hovering, and with a radiant little grin, she says, "Darling? Would you go and get your father for us, please. . . ?"

Last year, with a belated fanfare, the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum set up a modest display of small artifacts from the Nodaway spacecraft. Surviving witnesses were invited to Washington for the opening ceremonies. But it was scheduled during harvest, which was Father's best excuse for not making the trip. "He's going to be too busy," Mom told Emma during one of their long Sunday morning phone calls. "And it isn't a free trip for us if he can't get our crops to the bins this fall. . . . "

The ceremony was covered on the national news, but only C-Span covered it live. Emma invited her folks up to watch it on cable. But Mom called at the last minute to say, "Thank you, but no. We'll try to watch things from down here."

"With your lousy reception?" Emma barked.

"Well," she said. "Honestly, your father doesn't want any fuss made about this. Not now. Not after this long."

"God," cried Emma. "Doesn't that man have even the tiniest drop of imagination inside him?"

"Of course he has imagination," Mom replied. Hurt, and a little angry, too. "But it's just going to be someone else's ceremony, Emma. Don't you see?"

In the end, there wasn't any shortfall of witnesses. Several dozen retired Air Force men and withered old scientists and engineers were dressed in new suits, sitting in neat rows while the vice-president said a few forgettable words about the grand mysteries of the universe. Travis Bins' widow was present, sitting up front and representing Nodaway County. When the vice-president finished, the artifacts were finally presented to the cameras. Yet they were nothing. Or nearly nothing. Small amorphous globs of cooled metal, they looked much simpler than any human-built machine—an Apollo capsule or a digital watch would seem like marvels beside them—and to a layperson like her, they were far, far less intriguing than the stately old Spirit of St. Louis that dangled motionless in the nearby air.

"He doesn't like to talk about any of it," she warned Joseph.

"Why not?"

But instead of admitting the truth—that she didn't know her own father's mind—Emma decided to simply shake her head, saying, "Do this one little thing for me. Would you? Don't ever mention the spaceship to him."

In the end, that was too much to ask.

* * *

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"He wants to know about your spaceship," Grandma announces. Then when she can't hear anyone talking, she adds, "Tell him what you told me, Tom. About the flash of light. About following the deputy to where the poor things fell to earth."

Father glances at Emma, then Joseph. His face betrays nothing. Then he sets his half-eaten pie on the coffee table, and standing before his mother, he reports, "That's it, pretty much. I saw the light in the sky. We thought it might be a plane that had come down. So I drove after Travis, and we found it in the trees, just off the road in Louis' Woods, and I stayed there until the Air Force showed up and told everyone to go home."

Brace and Angel stand behind their father. People seem interested, even intrigued. The tension that Emma feels is entirely her own.

Then a wave of overfed kids come roaring into the living room.

"Quiet!" shouts Brace.

Angel grabs his oldest, whispering a threat into one ear.

"I didn't see anything special," Father promises. "Travis went in there for a close look. I pretty much stayed back."

And that's it. It seems as if nothing else needs to be said.

Father bends and reclaims his pie, then considers where he'll sit next. But before he decides, Joseph mentions to nobody, and everybody, "I wouldn't mind seeing the crash site someday. Just to see it."

The pause is brief, and electric.

Then with a laugh, Angel says, "Well, I'm tired of the noise in here. I could stand leaving. How about it? We can take my van."

An inch or two of soft wet snow has fallen, and more snow tumbles and swirls in the bluish yard light. Hanging over the world is a delicious hush, and Emma doesn't mind the cold on her face or the dampness against her gloved hands. Just standing out here would be enough quiet, she thinks. More than enough, really. Then comes the smooth metal sound of a door opening, and Angel climbs into the Caravan and starts the engine and wipers and the headlights and turns up the defroster to full-blast.

Angel opens the passenger door for them. Joseph uses the sliding door, claiming the seat behind the driver.

"No, no," says Angel. "You're the guest. Get on up here."

Joseph glances at Emma.

"Go on," she allows, then claims his seat.

Brace and Father are coming across the yard. Not fast, but not slow, either. Brace dips his head a little and says something, and maybe Father answers him. Then Brace says something else and pats Father on the back, and both men laugh as they climb up into the bright cold noisy van.

Father settles beside Emma. Brace sits behind everyone.

"Which way's best?" asks Angel.

"The highway first," Brace advises. "Then turn after the old Rock Island crossing. The county put up a big sign to mark the corner, so you can't hardly miss it."

Emma looks at Father, looks at Joseph.

Passing the house, Angel honks once. Then he pulls out onto the county road, trying his high-beams and dropping back to his lows when he can't see anything but falling snow. For Angel, he drives slowly. Cautiously. At the highway, he makes a rolling stop, turning south, and glancing over at Joseph, he says, "So. You're interested in our little spaceship?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Aren't you?" Joseph answers.

"Oh, sure," says Angel. "I mean, it did put this county on the map, and all."

Joseph says nothing.

Angel gives him a look, smiling. Then he prompts him, asking, "What do you know about our ship? Much?"

"A little bit, I guess."

"Like what?"

"I'm a biologist," Joseph admits. "I don't have any opinions about the alloys or what might or might not have been computer circuitry."

"Well, that's no fun," Angel kids.

Joseph halfway laughs, then says, "Anyway. Knowing there's life on other planets is the biggest thing. To me."

"But is that such a fat surprise? With all the planets and suns out there, why wouldn't there be life *somewhere?*"

"Oh, sure."

"Like those fossils from Mars," says Angel. "That shows you how tough life is."

"*If* they're fossils," Joseph counters.

"Sure. If." Angel tries his high-beams again, and gives up on them again. "Am I right? Were those aliens pretty much like us?"

"They had DNA," Joseph explains. "And they probably used oxygen to run their metabolisms, yes. But a lot of the surviving amino acids are different from ours. Which means their proteins had to be significantly different."

Father leans forward, just a little. Then he decides to say nothing and leans back again, eyes focused on the snowy highway.

"What else do we know?" Angel asks.

"Next to nothing," Joseph admits. "We aren't certain what they looked like, in life. Most reconstructions show humanoids, but that could be our own expectations at work. We don't know their real size. We aren't sure how many were onboard. Two and three and five are the favorite numbers. They may or may not have been plugged into their ship's machinery. Plenty of hardware is embedded, but with the speed of the impact and the heat afterward . . . well, there's just an awful lot that can't be answered. . . . "

"Where did the poor fools come from?" says Angel.

"Exactly," says Joseph. "Exactly."

The railroad tracks are still buried in the pavement, but the crossing signs are gone and the right-of-way has been stripped of its rails and its ties. Then comes the promised sign. Not large, but not small, either. "*The Nodaway Crash Site,*" Emma reads as they turn left, driving up a wide, well-graded road.

Nobody speaks for the next few minutes.

Emma watches how her father leans forward again, his eyes catching the glare of the headlights. Nothing resembling a landmark is visible. The road lifts and drops and lifts again, and the world is just this narrow strip of falling snow and resting snow and loose white rock that clatters against the van's underbelly. But the old man knows when they have arrived. It shows on his alert face, in his shoulders and his clenched hands. He doesn't say anything, but he gives a low little snort when Angel brakes and turns beside the final sign. A deep roadside ditch has been recently bridged. A new road, narrow but well-maintained, winds its way through a sudden little

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

forest of snow-clad trees. Then comes an abrupt little parking lot built with scarce county dollars, someone plainly hoping that tourists will eventually pass through, leaving a few of their fat dollars behind.

Angel parks in the middle of the empty lot, then kills the engine.

The world shrinks to a sudden perfect darkness that closes over each of them. Did anyone remember a flashlight?

Brace did. Of course. And Angel reaches under his seat and pulls out a tired little light that he smacks a few times, making it brighten.

If anything, the silence is deeper than before.

The snow absorbs every tiny sound, and it softens voices and the closing of car doors. Joseph ends up walking beside Father, following the brothers as they march along a little trail, and in a casual way, he asks, "How close did you get to the crash?"

"Closer than this," Father admits.

The trail turns softly to the right, then ends.

"Right here," he says.

The clearing isn't as large as Emma expected, and even twice as large, it still wouldn't feel roomy. The Historical Commission has erected another stone and bronze marker, plus a series of diagrams and government photographs encased in thick plastic. Brace brushes them clean of snow, shining his light on the first diagram. But then Father starts to talk, his voice low and steady, and nobody is reading, everyone listening as they look out across that little weed-choked field.

"We'd had a good hard rain that day," he explains. "Enough to wet things down, which is why, I guess, there wasn't more of a fire."

Angel's flashlight flickers, dies.

"But it was plenty hot standing here," says Father. "I was a kid and it was so long ago, which I guess is why I didn't think about things like radiation. I didn't worry about anything. Travis and Old Louis went out farther, but all that liquid metal and the busted-up, burning timber and such . . . well, it pushed them back to us again. . . .

"The ship was already in a million pieces," he says.

"From what I understand, the government had to dig down forty feet to get every little bit. Then they brought in fill earth to hide what they'd done. Except, of course, it was a different kind of soil, and nothing grows as well in it, and that's a big part of why nothing's ever really grown back here."

One diagram shows a hypothetical model of the spaceship. It's smaller than most houses. Because it seems so incredible, and unlikely, Emma points out, "Who would have thought that a starship could be this tiny?"

"It was a lifeboat," says Angel.

But Joseph shakes his head, saying, "Maybe. Except that it takes a huge amount of energy to travel between stars. Tiny ships might be more likely than giant ones."

Then everyone turns silent again.

Waiting for Father.

"We knew it wasn't a meteorite," he says. "Before, when I was standing on the highway with Travis, I noticed how it moved slower and slower as it fell. Then at the end, all at once, it did this crazy roll and dove in. I always figured they were trying to get control over it. You know? The pilot holds on to the stick, fighting his momentum to the end. . . ? But I don't know. Thinking back, knowing a little bit more about things, I wonder if the pilot had something else in mind. . . ."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Like what?" asks Joseph.

Asks Emma.

"They were dead. And they knew they were dead. And that last roll was to give them back some of their momentum, making certain that when they hit, it would be hard. Hard enough to destroy everything about them. Hard enough to leave nothing here that could mean anything to anyone. Which is why we still haven't learned anything too important or useful. That's the way they *wanted* things. Whoever they were."

Nobody spoke.

Everyone stared at the unbroken snow, thinking it over for themselves.

With a palpable respect, Joseph turns and asks her father, "Why don't you like to talk about the crash?"

The old man shrugged his shoulders.

Then with a quiet, almost embarrassed voice, he says, "The poor critters." He says, "They came a long way just to die here, and they seemed to work hard to hide everything about themselves from us . . . and I guess . . . I guess I just think we ought to honor their choice. . . .

"Know what I mean. . . ?"

The snow eases up.

Back in the van again, with Angel driving back toward the highway, nobody feels like talking. Emma sits next to Joseph. Father's up in the front seat now. Brace is in back. Emma looks at Joseph by the reflected glare of the headlights, wondering what his expression means. Then she wonders if it will always be this way? Is she going to spend the rest of her life trying to decipher his various moods?

"I hope so," she mouths.

They're climbing one of the long anonymous hills, and Angel tries his high-beams one more time.

Suddenly Brace sits forward, saying, "Look."

Saying, "See it?"

Almost too late, she looks up the bright snowy road, her tired eyes barely able to focus on something low and moving. Not like a deer moves at all, she realizes. Not bounding, or stepping. Just flowing. Then whatever it is flows off into the ditch, and only a second has passed, or two seconds, and she mutters to herself, "Was it? *Was* it?"

"Faster," Brace urges.

Angel hits the gas, then stops just short of the spot.

Whatever it was, it has vanished now.

Everyone climbs out of the van, and Brace says, "Kill your headlights," to his brother. Then he swings his little flashlight back and forth, talking in a whisper, telling everyone, "Watch for the flash of her eyes."

Past the ditch is a field, brushy and punctuated with knots of low-growing timber. A thousand full-grown cougars could hide there, all within sight of the road.

Emma turns to Joseph.

Where is he?

The driver's door is open. Joseph is inside the cab, digging the other flashlight out from under the seat. Then he starts up the road, walking quickly, smacking the plastic body against his free hand until a weak light flickers into something brighter.

In the new snow, a line of perfect tracks has been left behind.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She finds Joseph kneeling over the tracks, excited enough that the beam jumps and jiggles in his hand. They look like the pawprints of an extremely large dog. But what she saw wasn't any dog. It was too low. It moved too much like a big cat. And wasn't there a long, long tail that she saw as it dropped into the grassy ditch?

"Was it a dog?" she whispers.

Joseph gives a little laugh. "I don't see any claws," he says. "Do you?"

No. None.

The other men have gathered behind them. Joseph stands and walks to the ditch, then considers following the trail out into the field. It's easy to see his thinking now. But Brace points out, "It's late, and it's lousy footing. And believe me, if that animal lets you catch up with her, then there's something wrong with her. And you're not going to have a very sweet Christmas this year."

Joseph straightens, turns off the flashlight and hands it back to Angel.

"Thanks," he whispers.

Then there's nothing left but to return to the van. Emma finds herself walking beside Joseph. Not fast, not slow. As the headlights come on again, she looks at his face. A strange expression is building, wrapped around a wide smile. And since they're alone for the moment, she has to ask him, "What are you thinking?"

He looks off into the darkness.

"After everything that's happened today," he asks, "do you know what's the biggest surprise for me?"

Emma shakes her head and breathlessly says, "No. I don't."

Then he looks at her and says, "This thing that I keep feeling deep inside me."

"What thing?"

And laughing, he says, "I'm *happy!*" O

We welcome your letters, which should be sent to ***Asimov's***, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, NY 10016 or e-mail to **asimovs@dellmagazines.com**. Space and time make it impossible to print or answer all letters, but please include your mailing address even if you use e-mail. If you don't want your address printed, put it only in the heading of your letter; if you do want it printed, please put your address under your signature. We reserve the right to shorten and copy-edit letters. The above e-mail address is for editorial correspondence *only*—please direct all subscription inquiries to: P. O. Box 54033, Boulder, Co 80322-4033 or **smarlowe@pennypublications.com.**

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

CURSE OF THE FANTASY WRITER'S WIFE

A cookout by the Jensens' pool
with bridge and small talk afterward
cannot compete with Gormenghasts
and Xanadus he's built from words.
He plays a club upon her heart and
whispers harshly, "Aren't you bored?"
The night is full of bloody swords.

His paunch distends across his lap.
His fingers fly across the keys.
Rippling sinews bend the oars
and drive the prow into the breeze.
Cries of rage soon wrench the air
and dead men float upon the seas.
His seat expands. His hair recedes

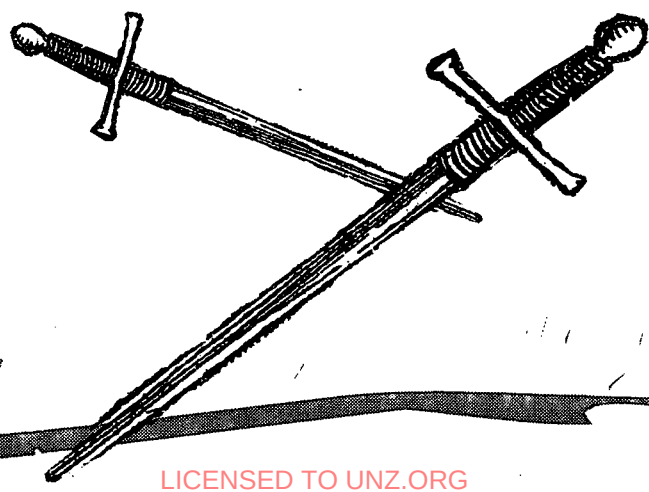
With heels . . . perfume . . . little more,
his heady passion she has sought.
Bold courtesans and comely maids
praise the battles he has fought.
Forget their vows. Forget their bed
Forget the teddy she has bought.
He loves the women he has wrought.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"The house needs work," she pines.
"There are things I cannot fix."
"The shutters should be taken down."
"The tomato plants need sticks."
"Your yellow shirt is in the drawer
Time to dress. It's nearly six.
And don't forget to bring the mix."

"Not now," he mumbles, "arrows fly.
Darkling hordes approach the gates.
The prince has quaffed a poison draught.
The mages must implore the fates."
He blinks and keys another line.
"Just tell the Jensens we'll be late.
Reality will have to wait."

—Bruce Boston



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Lois Tilton

Lois Tilton fashions a nightmarish look at experimentation and . . .

THE SCIENTIFIC COMMUNITY

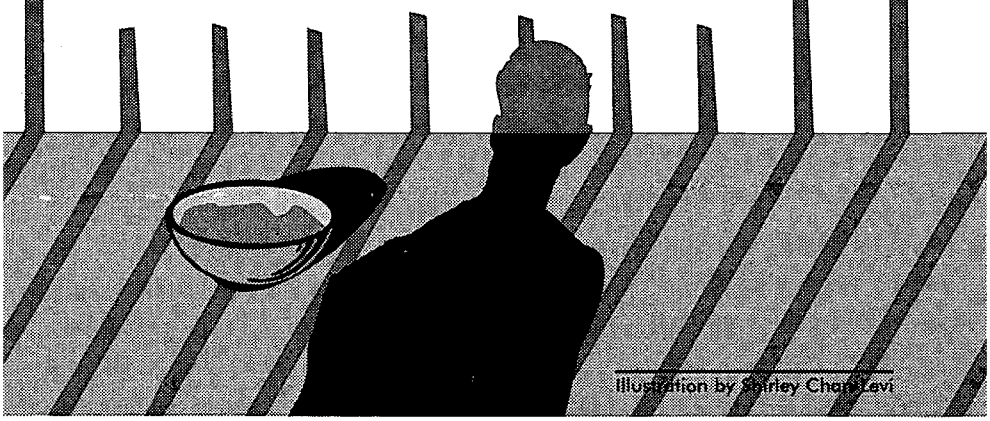


Illustration by Shirley Chan Levi

—Day 1—

Tan says they intend to give us all some kind of painful disease. He claims he overheard them talking about it when they brought him here. I don't know whether to believe him or not.

"Will it be fatal, do you think?" one of the others asks—Ani, the female next to me. "Will we die?"

"Maybe not. They might be experimenting to find a cure." I say this despite my misgivings about Tan's claim, but of course there's no way to know what they're going to do. They certainly wouldn't tell us if we asked. And even if it's supposed to be a cure, there's no telling if it will actually work. They'd probably only give the cure to half of us, anyway. That's the usual arrangement in these experiments.

I rub my hands up and down my arms, imagining the first twinges of pain. The disease might be growing in me already. How bad will it be? Will the symptoms come soon or will they take months to develop? This is hard, knowing I'll have to wait, the uncertainty.

To distract myself, I press the hand-plate in the front of the cell, next to the door. It pricks my finger, and a moment later the food bowl fills with chow. I quickly sample a piece, but there are no unpleasant surprises here. Sometimes, I've heard, they make changes in the chow during an experi-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ment. But this tastes the same as always. Soon my bowl is empty. I'd like more, but I doubt if I'll get it.

Across the corridor, Tan and the other female have followed my example. Only Ani, in the cell next to mine, is crouched on the floor with her arms wrapped around herself, rocking back and forth. "They're probably working on a cure," I try to reassure her. "It'll be all right. We don't even know for sure about this disease. It could be something else entirely, another kind of experiment."

Tan, overhearing, casts a hostile look in my direction. You'd think he actually wants to contract some painful disease, just to prove he's right.

Ani ignores both of us. She keeps rocking on the floor. "Don't you want to eat?" I ask her, but she makes no answer. I'd be glad to eat her chow if she didn't want it, but there's no way to get it from one cell to another. Too bad, I'm still hungry.

Just in case, I press my hand on the plate again, but nothing happens, no more chow appears in my bowl.

Across the corridor, Tan has got his prod in his hand now, working it back and forth, and in a moment it's jutting hard and erect. He glances over at me with a nasty grin, to see if I've noticed—a challenge. I decide to ignore him. Ani doesn't look up, but the other female, in the cell next to him, has certainly taken notice. I think I can make out her name on the door: Ida. She presses herself up against the clear partition separating her from Tan and moves her own hips in rhythm with him. Now Tan is ignoring me and everything else.

Of course now my own prod is reacting to the sight of what they're doing. I look over at Ani to see if she's interested, but she's still wallowing in her misery, oblivious to anything else. I think maybe Tan was the lucky one in the assignment of cells.

This experiment doesn't seem to be starting out very well at all.

—*Day 3*—

We've all agreed to share our symptoms with each other, whenever we notice any. This was Tan's idea. I didn't object, though I think maybe he was waiting for me to say, "If there ever are any symptoms." I don't want any needless quarrels with him. If Tan thinks he's won something by it, I don't care.

At any rate, none of us have noticed anything unusual. Yet. If it's a disease, it must be a slow-growing one. If it really is a disease.

Across the corridor, Tan and Ida have been presenting to each other a dozen times a day. I've approached Ani again, but she still isn't interested. I try to tell her there's no use crying about what might never happen, that even if the worst does come to pass, she might as well enjoy the time we have left. It only makes her start crying again.

Sometimes I face the back corner of my cell and try to make my movements inconspicuous, as if they didn't all know what I was doing. Tan, of course, is enjoying my frustration. Sometimes he'll just sit in the front of his cell and stroke his prod, smirking at me. After a while, Ida always notices and starts presenting herself to him. I try not to pay any attention, but it's not easy.

I wish it were Ida in the cell next to me, instead of Ani. Sometimes, when

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Tan is asleep, I can catch her attention. She knows that I'm watching her, of course. I can't help myself. There's something deliberately provocative in the way she moves, the way she sways her hips when she walks, but she never directly presents to me, only to Tan, pressing her lips right up to the partition between the cells and grinding her pelvis against it. I tell myself I won't look at her anymore, but I know I will.

I spend a lot of time pacing back and forth. I can take three steps from wall to wall, four from corner to corner. I make patterns of it, imagining my footprints leaving tracks on the floor. Of course they don't. I keep count of the number of paces—a thousand before I allow myself to press the hand-plate again, but it's usually not soon enough. All this frustration makes me hungry.

It's worse because Ani keeps leaving half her chow uneaten in her bowl. I can't stop staring at it—maybe more often than I find myself staring at Ani. "You should eat," I tell her. "You might make yourself sick, going hungry." I know why she won't eat. She's afraid that maybe they put the germs of the disease in the chow.

This notion makes Tan laugh. "If they did, Rik would be dead already by now!"

I wish sometimes that Tan would start to show signs of disease.

—Day 6—

They come into the lab every day to check on us. Every day just after the third feeding. I always know when to expect them.

Tan and the others pretend to ignore them. I—watch them sometimes. They're so strange to look at, with their blue coats covering everything. I used to wonder how they can tell which are male and which are female. I suppose they all have prods and lips, the same as we do, underneath, but you have to wonder if they have to take their coats off to present to each other, or how they do it with them on.

Today when they come in, Tan and Ida are going at it. One of them makes an expression of disgust, and her companion laughs unpleasantly when he replies. I'm suddenly glad it isn't me with his thick swollen prod in his hand, to have them look at me that way.

But the elder one reprimands them both sharply, and they don't look up at us again when they come to check the readouts on the front of our cells. The female—I know she's a female now from hearing her voice—has to flip her hair back away from her face as she bends down. What an inconvenience it must be, and how hard is it to keep clean?

I wonder what my readout says, whether I show any signs of disease in my blood yet. But I know that if I asked, they'd just pretend they couldn't hear me or understand what I said.

They seem satisfied, at least, when they check my readout. And Tan's and Ida's. It's another matter when they come to Ani, though. They frown at their instruments and frown at Ani, and they stand together in the center of the corridor and talk in low voices.

Finally one of them comes up close to the front of her cell and taps on the door just above the hand-plate. *Koom, koom,* she croons, just like she's talking to a small child, and she makes a palm-down gesture of her hand as if she's pressing the plate. Ani ignores her.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I know what the problem is: Ani hasn't been pressing the hand-plate as often as the rest of us. The pricker in the hand-plate samples our blood, it's how they take their readings. But Ani thinks maybe the germs of the disease might be in the pricker, if not in the chow, and she hasn't been eating.

The female tries again: *Koom, Ani, koom!* But Ani turns her back to them.

They consult again in the center of the corridor, using low voices so they think we can't hear or understand, then the young female comes back and does something with a control. After that, Ani gets a lot less chow in her bowl every time, but still she leaves some of it.

—Day 11—

Tan has a discolored blotch on his belly. He didn't say anything about it to the rest of us, despite what we'd agreed, but of course Ida notices it. Ida's used to having a close look at Tan's belly and what he's got hanging right below it, but suddenly today Tan isn't presenting to her.

So she's suspicious, and as soon as she sees the discoloration, she starts screaming, "You promised you'd tell us! We all promised!" She even throws shit at the partition between them, she's so furious.

"It's nothing! It's just a rash!" he tries to argue, but none of us believe him, not after he tried to hide it from us.

Now Ani is crying again, she's sure she'll be the next one to get the disease. But I'm not concerned that much about Ani right now, because right across the corridor Ida is presenting to me, showing me her slick pink lips as she works her fingers in and out of them and thrusts her pelvis in my direction, and my prod is all stiff in my hand and about ready to spurt as I display it to her. And though somewhere in the back of my mind I know she's only doing this now to get back at Tan, I don't really care.

I notice that when the experimenters come into the lab to check on us later, they don't seem surprised to see the growth on Tan's belly. They already knew, from the reading of his blood, that he had the disease.

They probably know if I have it, too, even before it shows.

—Day 12—

I think I'll never understand females! As long as Ida was ignoring me, Ani paid no attention. She'd sit all day on the floor of her cell and draw patterns on the floor, never look at me, no matter how I tried to cheer her up or interest her in a little pleasure.

Now, though, with Ida displaying herself to me from across the corridor, Ani is suddenly jealous. Every time I look around, I can see her with her legs spread, or presenting herself in some other provocative pose. After just a day of this, with both of them contesting for my attention, my prod is limp from overuse.

Tan is in a rage. He curses at Ida and me for what we've been doing together, calls Ida the foulest names he can think of. She's a match for him, though, calls him a lying piece of shit for trying to conceal his symptoms. "And it was *your* idea! You wanted to know if the rest of us got the disease, but you tried to hide it when you did!"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He curses at the experimenters, too, when they come into the lab. He beats on the door of his cell with his fists, howls and screams at them. They pretend not to react, but I can spot a few glances at each other, a raised eyebrow and a slight shake of the head. They think he's gone crazy.

It makes me wonder—what if he has? What if that's another symptom of the disease?

I don't mention this notion to the others. It's probably just Tan. I think what really disturbs him isn't that he's taken the disease, but that he's the first, so far the only one to show any signs of it. The rest of us are still clean.

I suppose I could say this proves he was right all along: they are giving us a disease, but I don't mention it. I can see, though, that the blotch has spread further today, and the color is darker. This is what we're all facing, I remind myself. Tan may be first, but any of the rest of us could be next. It could be me.

Ani and I have checked each other over carefully, and so far we're still both clean. "Maybe this is an experiment to prevent the disease," Ani suggests. "Maybe the rest of us won't ever get it at all."

She presents her backside to me for a closer inspection, but it's clear from the way she tilts her hips that she has something else on her mind, not the disease. I've discovered how she can contort her body into the most incredible positions! She's more inventive about it than Ida, I have to admit.

—Day 16—

There's a small dark discoloration on one of Ani's breasts. I hesitate for a long time to mention it to her. I'm afraid she'll go back to crying in the back corner of her cell if she knows she's got the disease. It's a long time since things have been this good, I don't want to ruin it.

But I knew it was too much to hope that Tan would be the only one to get it. And in a way it makes sense. Ani and Tan—from their names I know they have to be related, and so many of these diseases have a genetic basis. So far, at least, Ida and I are still clean.

But Ani finally tells me she's seen the spot herself, already, yesterday.

"I thought you might be more . . . upset," I say cautiously. I've learned how volatile female emotions can be.

She shakes her head. "Now I don't have to worry about it anymore. I already know the worst. And like you always said, I might as well enjoy myself now, as long as I can." She rubs her groin in a way that makes it clear exactly how she means to enjoy herself.

My response is half-hearted. I can't quite get it out of my head that I might be the next one to start showing symptoms. Or not. It's the not knowing that's hard! Ani is right about that much. But I urge my prod to respond. I don't want her to start saying, "I'll bet Tan could still get it stiff, if you can't."

Across the corridor, I see Ida watching us. I don't like the look in her eye at all. Truth to tell, I'd still rather it was Ida in the cell next to me. It looks like we might be the two survivors, and sometimes the survivors get to mate together, after the experiments are all over. But Ani is right here, and willing and enthusiastic. And Ida, I remind myself, has always only turned to me as second-best, after Tan.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Suddenly the door of the lab opens. I hadn't expected them, I hadn't been paying attention to the time. Now I catch a glimpse of the young female as her face reddens with embarrassment. The sudden flush of shame makes my prod go soft, and from across the corridor Tan hoots in derision at my downfall.

—Day 22—

The disease is spreading across Tan's body rapidly. Even from across the corridor I can see it. The lesions are red and raw and a fluid is seeping from some of them. He claims it isn't as painful as it looks, that the diseased places are mostly numb. I've tried to express my sympathy, but Tan won't have any of it. Ani is the only one he'll speak to now.

Her condition isn't so far advanced yet, but I can see where a couple of the sores are starting to ooze. She pretends that none of this is happening to her. She complains if I don't respond right away whenever she presents to me, or if I even look over in the direction of Ida's cell. But I notice that she's started leaving her chow uneaten in her bowl again, and her face is taking on a kind of hollow look, with dark circles under the eyes. I'm starting to think she may die even before Tan does.

Today when the experimenters come they bring an equipment cart with them. The sight of it makes us all stop and stare. Could this be the cure?

They go to Tan's cell first, to one of the controls on the front panel. A moment later he falls unconscious. The floor slides forward as the door swings open, so they can work on him. We all watch. There's a needle and tubing, but it's hard to tell just what they're doing to him, taking blood out of his veins or putting something in? The cure, maybe? It doesn't take long, whatever it is. The floor pulls back, and the door closes again.

Then they turn to Ani.

No! She screams, *No!* She leaps to the back of her cell, as if she could climb the wall, but of course she only slides down.

The experimenters shake their heads. The male goes to the front panel of her cell and touches the control, and she collapses in mid-lunge. They pull her out and do to her whatever they did to Tan. I have a better view from here, it looks like they're taking blood.

But I tell her, "It's probably the cure, this is probably how they're testing the cure for the disease."

I don't know if she believes me. I'm not sure I believe it myself.

—Day 26—

Tan claims there's a discolored spot on the back of Ida's thigh. He seems almost glad about it, taunting her: "Now you can see how you like it, rotting along with the rest of us!"

Of course Ida can't see the place herself, to know for sure. She screams and cries and curses him for making up such a lie, just because he's jealous and hateful and vindictive. Of course, I know Tan is jealous and hateful, but would he say such a thing if it weren't true? Ida begs Ani and me to look, to see for ourselves, to tell her the truth, but it's too far to see from across the corridor, and I can't be sure.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"You see!" she screams at Tan. "They don't see anything! You're lying! There's nothing there! It's a lie!"

I say nothing. To contradict her would make things even worse.

"Never mind them," Ani insists. She spreads her legs wide apart, presenting to me, demanding my attention.

I fail to respond. The screaming and invective across the corridor is too much to ignore. Ani jumps to her feet and strikes her fist against the partition. "What's the matter? Why can't you get it stiff? Am I too ugly for you to look at now?"

I look at her, I see the raw, oozing lesions on her belly and breasts, I see the stark corrugated shape of her ribs protruding through her skin. The cure, if it is a cure they're testing, doesn't seem to be working, at least not yet.

"No," I say, "that's not it, I'm just worried about Ida, how she's taking this." And thinking: *if Ida really does have the disease, then what about me? Will I be next?*

But it's the wrong thing to say to Ani, and I realize it as soon as I've opened my mouth. "Go ahead," she says, "point your prod at Ida instead of me! She's diseased now, too!" And she turns to Ida, beating on the door of her cell to get her attention. "See if you can get him stiff, he's always watching you, anyway!"

"Who'd ever want to look at you?" Ida yells back.

I back away, go to the hand-plate. All this tension makes my stomach hurt.

The experimenters don't have their cart when they come into the lab today. Ida rushes for the door, beats on it, screams to them, begs them to tell her if she really has the disease. By now even the young female has learned not to react. They've gotten used to it.

—Day 30—

There's no use denying it now. Ida has the disease. The blotch on her thigh is obvious, even from where I stand across the corridor.

Tan is sympathetic to her now that she's admitted it. "It doesn't really hurt that much," he tells her, the way he assured Ani earlier. "It looks worse than it feels."

But Ani still gloats relentlessly, and it's very unpleasant to hear her. "You're going to die with the rest of us," she keeps saying to Ida. "You're not so special anymore, are you?"

She taunts me, too, because I can't respond to her now, says that my prod might as well rot and fall off like Tan's, for as much good as it does.

Tan's prod hasn't actually fallen off, but the lesions have left it a crusty, bleeding mess, like the rest of him. Remarkably, though, he can still get it stiff, even though he must be making his condition worse. I don't see how he can stand it.

This is going to happen to me, I keep thinking every time I look at him. I'm going to be the next one to get the disease, and soon my own body is going to be crusted with oozing sores. It can only be a matter of time.

Now Ani is positioning herself at the front of her cell, facing him, presenting to him in the most blatant way. He grins, he stands up and thrusts his scabrous prod in her direction, a salute. They quickly establish a rhythm together.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

And now, *now* my own prod decides to respond, seeing what they're doing. I quickly turn so that Ani won't see, but too late, I can tell from the sneer on her face.

I ought to turn to Ida, show them I don't care. Ida wouldn't disappoint me, I know. But to do it, I'd have to stand next to Ani, in the front of the cell, and I just can't make myself do it.

—Day 33—

I keep looking, I keep examining myself, everywhere I can see, but still no signs of the disease. I keep thinking: maybe the initial discoloration is somewhere I can't see, maybe on my back.

I wish I could ask Ani to check for me, the way we used to, but she's not speaking to me these days. Would she tell me if she saw anything? Maybe she'd lie—I wouldn't put it past her to lie. Maybe it's best that she doesn't say anything.

Still, I wish I could be sure!

Ida would tell me, I think, only that it's hard for her to see so far across the corridor. But I wonder. There seems something distant about her these days, something unfriendly. I wonder if it's something I've done. I know I don't feel comfortable about presenting to her anymore, even when Ani and Tan aren't watching.

Instead, I mostly sit and stare into the corridor, watching the door at the far end. Lately, when the experimenters come into the lab to check the readouts, it seems that they're paying particular attention to mine. Or is it just my imagination?

Maybe I've finally caught the disease, even though I show no outward signs of it. Or maybe I was supposed to have caught it by now, but I haven't. Maybe they've been experimenting with a preventative, not a cure, and I'm the only one it's worked on.

It's so tempting to hope. Of course at the beginning we all hoped we might not get the disease. It's strange, now, to think it might be true, that I might be the only one.

Only what would the others think?

I decide to say nothing to them. I don't dare.

—Day 40—

Still no sign of the disease anywhere on my body that I can see.

The others aren't speaking to me at all now, not even Ida. They've noticed how much attention the experimenters are paying to my readout. As if it were my fault!

I admit—it's hard to go through the day like this with Ani in the next cell, emaciated as she is. There's one place on her chest where I can actually see the rib bone exposed, the ulcer is so deep. I'd try to help, whatever I could do, but she won't even listen to me. It's not like I've been taking the food out of her bowl. There was never much flesh on her to begin with, and she wouldn't eat, she'd never eat, no matter how I urged her, for her own good. But it's too late now. She can barely get to her feet.

But what am I supposed to do, I can't make myself get the disease!

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

—Day 42—

They have Ani on tube feedings now, and it seems to help. She looks quite a bit better, though the ulcers covering her body are still oozing blood, like Tan's. Just a few days ago, I'd have thought she might be dead by now, but that doesn't seem to be part of the experiment, to see how soon we die.

Ida thinks this might still mean they're trying to find a cure, but no one else will agree with her. If it's a cure, it's certainly not a very effective one.

Today they bring Ida out for the first time. I pay close attention to the process as they slip the needles into her arms, hoping to overhear some remark I might be able to understand. I think that maybe they're growing the disease in us, harvesting the germs this way, in our blood. Why would they want to do this, though? What would be the reason?

Then they come to my cell again. Anxiously, I watch them check the readout, frown, shake their heads. They see me observing them and turn away, speaking together in low voices as they always do. They're still paying far too much attention to me these days.

The young female approaches. She puts out her hand and pats the door of the cell closest to the hand-plate. They want another blood sample from me. I hesitate.

Rik! I recognize the sound of my name. *Rik—luk!*

I look at what she's holding out to me. She peels the wrapper away. My mouth starts to water. I can't help myself. And it doesn't really matter whether I cooperate, I remind myself. They can do whatever they want to me.

I hit the hand-plate, I feel the pricker stab me. *Gud!* she exclaims, and the treat rolls into my food bowl. I pop it into my mouth, savoring the sweetness, the rich release of flavors. It's the best thing I've ever tasted in my life, and I realize with a sudden insight: this is what *they* eat!

They consult their instruments again, shake their heads. I know what the problem must be: I don't have the disease. We were all supposed to have it by now, but I'm different, I don't. They don't understand why.

Across the corridor, Ida has regained consciousness already. "They gave you something! I saw it!"

"It wasn't anything," I try to protest, but she isn't listening. "It's the cure! They're giving you the cure! They're giving it to you and not the rest of us!"

She turns to Tan. "I saw! It's the cure! They've been giving him the cure! I saw them!"

He raises himself to a half-sitting position where he can see across the corridor into my cell. "No wonder he wanted us to believe there wasn't any disease, from the beginning!"

"He was lying! All along, he knew!"

I deny it. "I never knew anything! I still don't know what's going on!"

"I saw what she gave you!" she accuses.

"They never gave me anything before today!" But I know there's nothing I can say to defend myself. Both of them have already made up their minds. They tell Ani, too, when she finally wakes up, and she believes them. It doesn't matter that she hasn't spoken to Ida in weeks, now she believes her.

"It's not my fault!" I keep trying to tell them, but it's no use. They all have the disease and I don't, and that makes me guilty.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

—Day 43—

They bring the equipment cart directly to my cell today. As soon as I see it, I start backing away. I'm afraid. I don't know what they're going to do to me. I think of Ani screaming, trying to climb the walls to get away from them. But there is no getting away from them.

Then I'm lying on the floor and I can barely lift my head. They're already gone.

"What did they do?" I ask the others, pounding on the front of my cell to get their attention. "What did they do to me?"

Ani and Ida just turn away. Tan—laughs. "What's the matter, are you afraid you might get a disease?"

I see a bruised place on the inside of my elbow, a tiny scab of dried blood. I stare at it. I think: now I'll finally get it, this is where the first lesion will be, this is where it will start.

I don't know whether I feel relief or dread.

I'm dizzy when I first try to stand up, but the sensation soon passes into hunger. I start to go to the hand-plate, but first I look into my bowl. The sweet, juicy treat is already there, unwrapped.

I wonder if maybe it's not even part of the experiment.

—Day 44—

They're back already. Back too soon. They come straight to my cell again.

I back away, shaking my head. "No!" I protest, though I know they'll pretend not to hear me, not to understand. They always do.

—Day 1—

This new cell is three times as large as the other. There's a lot more room to move around. It means they plan to keep me here for a very long time. Alone.

They don't bother to speak in low voices anymore or hide what they're saying. I hear the words: *anomaly . . . immunity . . . metabolic factors . . .* It doesn't all make sense, but I know: it's because I never got the disease. They want to know why. I think maybe they're going to study me to find some way to prevent it, to pass on my natural immunity.

The young female in the blue coat has been watching to see how I settle into this new situation. She doesn't seem to think I'm doing very well. Now she comes closer. I hear her call my name: *Rik! Heer, Rik!*

I raise my head to see what she wants. She's holding out one of the treats in her hand, that taste so sweet and good. She's unwrapping it. *Rik?*

But I turn away. Again I examine my arms, my chest and belly, my legs—everywhere I can see. They might have made a mistake. There might still be a chance. Just one discolored place, one lesion. If I show it to them, they'll have to take me back. I can be with the others again. With Ida. Tan. Ani, if she's still alive. Back in the lab with all the rest of them, where I belong. O

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

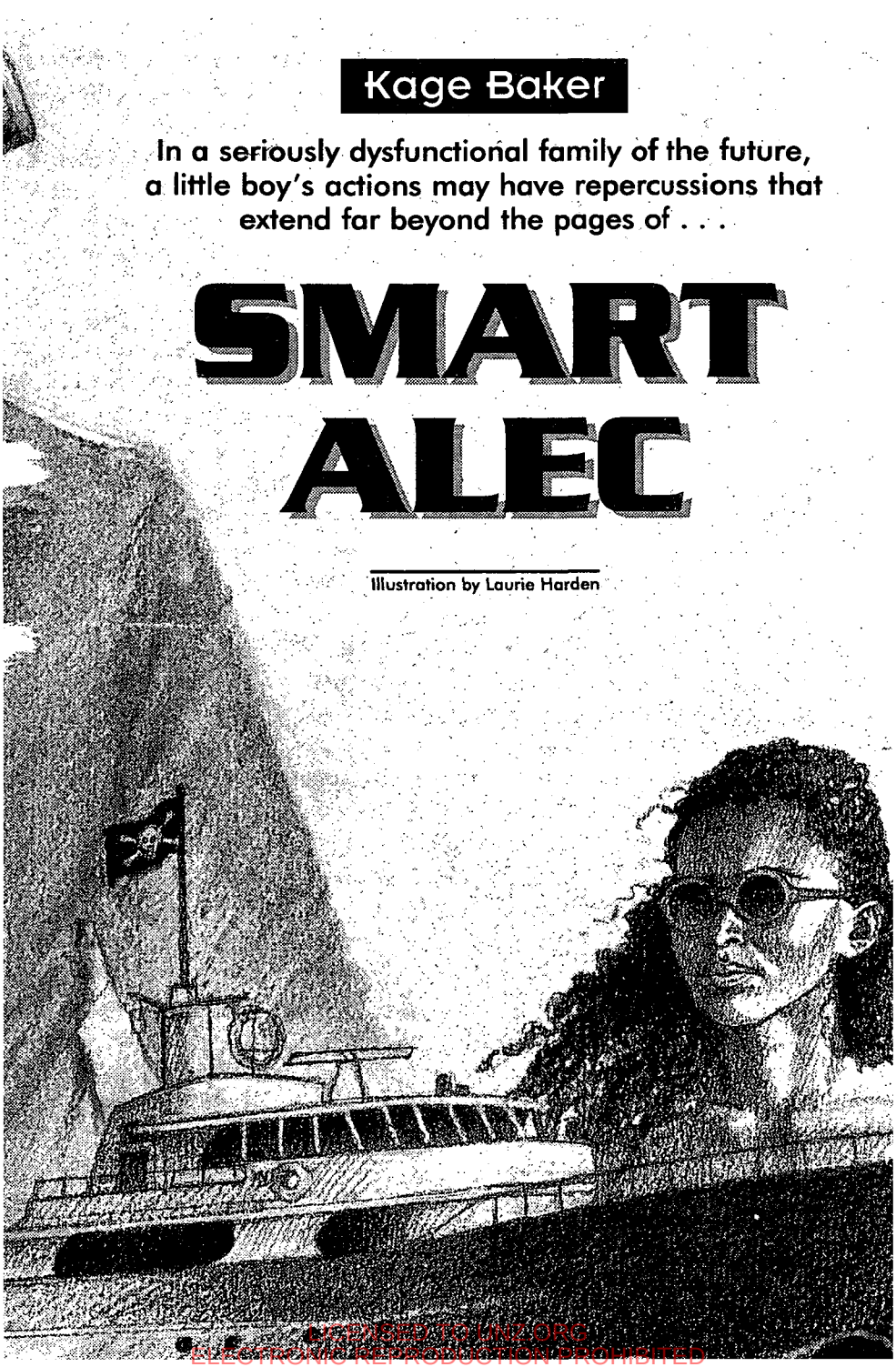
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Kage Baker

In a seriously dysfunctional family of the future, a little boy's actions may have repercussions that extend far beyond the pages of . . .

SMART ALEC

Illustration by Laurie Harden



LICENSED TO IAE.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

For the first four years of his life, Alec Checkerfield wore a life vest. This was so that if he accidentally went over the side of his parents' yacht, he would be guaranteed a rescue. It was state of the art, as life vests went in the twenty-first century: not only would it have enabled him to bob along like a little cork in the wake of the *Foxy Lady,* it would have reassured him in a soothing voice programmed to allay panic, broadcast a frequency that repelled sharks, and sounded an immediate alarm on the paging device worn by every one of the servants on board.

His parents themselves wore no pagers, which was just as well, because if Mummy had noticed Alec was in the water, she'd probably have simply waved her handkerchief after him until he was well over the horizon. Daddy would probably have made an effort to rescue Alec, if he weren't too stoned to notice the emergency; but most of the time he *was,* which was why the servants had been appointed to save Alec, should the child ever fall overboard. They were all madly fond of Alec, anyway, because he was really a very good little boy, so they were sure to have done a great job, if the need for rescue at sea should ever have arisen.

It never did arise, however, because Alec was a rather well-coordinated child too, and generally did what he was told, such as obeying safety rules at sea.

And he was a happy child, despite the fact that his mother never set her ice-blue eyes on him if she could help it and his father was as likely to trip over him as speak to him. It didn't matter that they were terrible at being parents; they were also very rich, which meant they could pay *other* people to love Alec.

In a later time, Alec would look back on the years aboard the *Foxy Lady* as the happiest in his life, and sometimes he'd come across the old group holo and wonder why it had all ended. The picture had been taken in Jamaica, by somebody standing on a mooring catwalk and shooting down on deck.

There he was, three years old, in his bright red life vest and little sailor hat, smiling brightly up at the camera. Assembled around him were all the servants: fabulous Sarah, his Jamaican nurse, arrogantly naked except for blue bathing shorts; Lewin and Mrs. Lewin, the butler and cook; Reggie, Bob, and Cat, the deckhands; and Mr. Trefusis, the First Mate. They formed a loving and protective wall between Alec and his mummy and daddy, or Roger and Cecilia, as they preferred to be called.

Roger and Cecilia were visible up on the quarterdeck: Cecilia ignoring them all from her deck chair, a cold presence in a sun hat and dark glasses, reading a novel. Roger was less visible, leaning slouched against the rail, one nerveless hand about to spill a rum highball all over his yachting shoes. He'd turned his face away to look at something just as the image had been recorded, so all you could see was a glimpse of aristocratic profile, blurred and enigmatic.

Oh, but it hadn't mattered. Alec had had a wonderful life, full of adventures. Sarah would tell him stories about Sir Henry Morgan and all the pirates who used to roam the sea, living on their ships just like Alec did, and how they formed the Free Brotherhood of the Coast. Alec liked that. It was a grand-sounding name.

And there was the fun of landing on a new island—what would it be like? Was there any chance there might be pirates still lurking around? Alec had played on beaches where the sand was white, or yellow, or pink, or black,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

built castles on all of them and stuck his little pirate flags on their turrets. *Jolly Roger,* that was what the flag was called.

Jolly Roger was also what the deckhands called Alec's daddy when he seemed to be having more than usual difficulty walking or talking. This was generally after he'd been drinking the tall drinks Cat would shake up for him at the bar on the yacht. Sometimes Cat would put a fruit spear in the drinks, cherries and chunks of pineapple skewered on long wooden picks with the paper pirate flag at the top. Sometimes Daddy's eyes would focus on Alec and he'd present him with the fruit spear and yell for more rum in his drink. Alec would sit under Daddy's tall chair and eat the pineapple and cherries, making faces at the nasty stuff they'd been soaked in. Then he'd carry the Jolly Roger toothpick back to his cabin, where he had a whole hoard of them carefully saved for his sand castles.

It was a shame the rum had such an effect on Daddy, because going to get it was always fun. The *Foxy Lady* would drop anchor in some sapphire bay, and Sarah would put on a halter top and shoes, and put shoes on Alec, and they'd go ashore together in the launch. And as they'd come across the water Sarah might sing out, *"How many houses, baby?"* and Alec would look up at the town and count the houses in his head and he'd tell her how many there were, and she'd tousle his hair and tell him he was right again! And they'd laugh.

Then there'd be a long walk through some island town, past the gracious houses with window boxes full of pink flowers, where parrots flashed and screamed in the green gardens, back to the wappen-bappen places where the houses looked like they were about to fall down, and there would always be a doormouth with no sign and a dark cool room beyond, full of quiet black men sitting at tables, or brown men, or white men turned red from the sun. There Sarah would do a deal; and Alec and Sarah would sit at a table while the men loaded crates into a battered old vehicle.

Then Alec and Sarah would go out into the bright sunlight again, and the driver would give them a ride back into town with the crates. The crates were nearly always stenciled CROSSE & BLACKWELL'S PICKLED GHERKINS.

And nearly always, they'd spot a stern-looking black or brown or white man in a white uniform, pedaling along on a bicycle, and Sarah would hug Alec tight and cry out in a little silly voice: "Oh, nooo, it's a policeman! Don't tell him, Alec, don't tell him our secret!" This always made Alec giggle, and she'd always go on: "Don't tell him we've got GUNS! Don't tell him we've got EXPLOSIVES! Don't tell him we've got GANJA! Don't tell him we've got COFFEE!" She'd go on and on like this, as they'd bump along trailing dust clouds and squawking birds, and by the time they reached the harbor, Alec would be weak with laughter.

Once they were at the launch, however, she'd be all quiet efficiency, buckling Alec into his seat and then helping the man move the crates into the cargo bay. When all the crates were on board, the man would hold out a plaquette and Sarah would bring out Daddy's identification disk and pay for the crates, and then they'd zoom back out to the *Foxy Lady*. They'd put out to sea again, and the next day there would be rows of brown bottles under the bar once more, and Cat would be busy shaking up the long drinks, and Daddy would be sitting on the aft deck with a glass in his hand, staring vacantly out at the blue horizon.

Not everybody thought that the trips to get the rum were such a good idea, however.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Alec was sitting in the saloon one day after just such a trip, quietly coloring. He had made a picture of a shark fighting with an anchor, because he knew how to draw anchors and he knew how to draw sharks, and that was all the logic the scene needed. The saloon was just aft of the galley. Because it was very warm that day the connecting door was open, and he could hear Lewin and Mrs. Lewin talking in disgusted tones.

"He only gets away with it because he's a peer."

"Peer or no, you'd think he'd stop it for the kid's sake! He was such a brilliant teacher, too, and what's he given that all up for? He used to *do* something with his life, and look at him now! And what would happen if we were ever boarded for inspection? They'd take the baby away in a minute, you know they would!" Chop, chop, chop, Mrs. Lewin was cutting up peppers as she talked.

"Don't think so. J.I.S. would smooth it over, same as they've always done. Between his lineage and Them, he can do whatever he bloody well pleases, even in London."

"Yeh, well! Things was different before Alec came, weren't they? Don't forget that J.I.S. would have something to say if they knew he was drinking where the baby could see! And anyway it's *wrong,* Malcolm, you know it is, it's criminal, it's dangerous, it's unhealthy, and really the best thing we could do for him would be to tell a Public Health Monitor about the alcohol."

"And where'd we be, then? The last thing J.I.S. would want'd be some Public Health doctor examining the boy—" Lewin started through the doorway and saw Alec in the saloon. He caught his breath and shut the door.

Alec sat frowning at his picture. He knew that Daddy's drinking made people sad, but he'd never thought it was dangerous. He got up and trotted out of the saloon. There was Daddy on the aft deck, smiling dreamily at the sun above the yardarm.

"Hey, there, Alec," he greeted the little boy. He had a sip of his drink and reached out to tousle Alec's hair. "Look out there to starboard. Is that a pretty good island? Should we go there, maybe?"

Alec shivered with joy. Daddy almost never noticed him, and here he was asking Alec's opinion about something.

"Yeah!" he cried. "Let's go!"

But Daddy's gaze had drifted away, back to the horizon, and he lifted his glass again. "Some green island we haven't found yet," he murmured, "farther on 'n farther on 'n farther on. . . ."

Alec remembered what he had wanted to ask. He reached out and pushed at Daddy's glass with his index finger.

"Is that crinimal?" he inquired. It was a moment before Daddy played that back and turned to stare at him.

"What?"

"Is that dangerous?" Alex persisted, and mimed perfectly the drinking-from-a-bottle gesture he had seen the servants make in reference to his father. "If I see danger I'm supposed to tell."

"Huh," said Daddy, and he rubbed his scratchy chin. He hadn't shaved in about a week. His eyes narrowed and he looked at Alec slyly.

"Tell me, Alec, 'm I hurting anybody?"

"No."

"We ever had an accident on this ship? Anything happen ol' Roger can't handle?"

"No."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Then where's the harm?" Daddy had another sip. "Tell me that. 'M a nice guy even when I'm stoned. A Gentleman You Know. Old School Tie."

Alec had no idea what that meant, but he pushed on:

"How come it's crinimal?"

"Aha." Daddy tilted his glass until the ice fell down against his lip. He crunched ice and continued, "Okay, Alec. Big fact of life. There's a whole bunch of busybodies and scaredy-cats who make a whole bunch of rules and regs about things they don't want anybody doing. See? So nobody gets to have any fun. Like, no booze. They made a law about no booze. And they're all, 'You can't lie about in the sun because you get cancer,' and they're all, 'You can't swim in the ocean 'cos you might pee,' and they're all, 'You can't eat sweets because they make you fat,' okay? Dumb stuff. And they make laws so you go to hospital if you do this little dumb stuff! Okay?

"That's why we don't live in London, kiddo. That's why we live out here on the *Lady,* so no scaredy-cat's gonna tell us what to do. Okay? Now then. If you went running to the scaredy-cats to tell 'em about the rum, you'd be an even worse thing than them. You'd be a telltale! See? And you gotta remember you're a gentleman, and no gentleman is ever a telltale. See? 'Cos if you did tell about the rum, well, they'd come on board and they'd see me with my little harmless drinkies and they'd see your mummy with her books and they'd see Sarah with her lovely bare tits, and then you know what they'd do? Daddy'd go to hospital and they'd take you away. Li'l Alec ain't gonna be a telltale, is he? He's my li'l gentleman, ain't he?"

"I don't want 'em to take me away!" Alec wailed, tears in his eyes. Daddy dropped his glass, reaching clumsily to pull Alec up on his lap, and the glass broke, but he didn't notice.

"'Course you don't! 'Cos we're free here on the *Foxy Lady,* and you're a gentleman and you got a right to be free, free, free. Okay? You won't tell on Daddy, not my li'l Alec. You just let old Jolly Roger go his ways and you never be a telltale, okay? And don't pay them no mind with their dumb rules."

"But they gonna board us for aspection!" Alec sobbed.

"Hey! Hey, kiddo, don't you worry. Daddy's a gentleman, don't forget, he's got some pull. I'm the bloody Earl 'a Finsbury, okay? *And* a CEO at J.I.S. And I'll tell you something else. Jovian Integrated Systems gonna have something to say, too. Nobody's gonna touch li'l Alec, he's such a special kid!"

That was right; Alec was a special kid, all the servants said so. For one thing, all other little boys were brought into this world by the Stork, but not Alec. He had come in an Agcopter. Reggie had told him so.

"Yeah, man!" Reggie had chuckled, looking around to be certain Sarah was nowhere within earshot. "The Stork call your daddy and say, 'Come out to Cromwell Cay!' And your daddy take the launch out where the copter waiting on the Cay at midnight, with the red light blinking, and when he come back, he bring Sarah with our little bundle of joy Alec! And we all get nice fat checks, too!"

Alec wiped his nose and was comforted. Daddy set him on the deck and yelled to Cat for another drink and told Alec to go play now somewhere. Alec would dearly have liked to stay and talk with Daddy; that had been the longest conversation they'd ever had together, and he had all kinds of questions. What was *Jovian Integrated Systems?* Why were some laws important, like wearing the life vest, and other laws were dumb? Why were gentlemen free? But Alec was a considerate and obedient little boy, so he

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

didn't ask, but went off to play, determined never, ever to be a telltale or a scaredy-cat.

Very shortly after that, the happy life came to an end.

It happened quite suddenly, too. One day, Mummy abruptly put down her novel, got up out of her deck chair, and stalked over to Daddy where he sat watching a Caribbean sunset.

"It's over, Rog," she said.

He turned a wondering face to her. "Huh?" he said. After a moment of staring into her eyes, he sighed. "Okay," he said.

And the *Foxy Lady* set a course that took her into grey waters, under cold skies, and Sarah packed up most of Alec's toys so he only had a few to play with, and got out his heaviest clothes. One day, they saw a very big island off the port bow. Sarah held him up and said: "Look! There's England!"

Alec saw pale cliffs and a meek little country beyond them, rolling fields stretching away into a cloudy distance, and, way off, the grey blocky mass of cities. The air didn't smell familiar at all. He stood shivering as Sarah buttoned him into an anorak, and watched the strange coastline unroll.

The Thames pulled them into London, and it was the biggest place Alec had ever seen. As the sun was setting, they steered into Tower Marina, and the long journey ended with a gentle bump against the rubber pilings. Alec went to bed that night feeling very strange; the *Foxy Lady* seemed to have become silent and heavy, motionless, stone like the stone city all around them, and for the first time that he could ever remember, the blue sea was gone. There were new smells too, and they frightened him inexplicably.

His cabin was full of the cold strange air when he woke up, and the sky was grey.

Everyone seemed to be in a hurry, and rather cross. Sarah bundled Alec into very thick heavy clothes indeed, leaving his life vest in the closet, and she herself put on more clothes than he had ever seen her wear. Daddy was wearing strange new clothes, too, stiff and uncomfortable-looking ones, and he had shaved. There was no breakfast cooking in the galley; Lewin had been ashore and come back with a box of Bentham's Bran Treats ("At least they're fresh baked!" he cried) and a dozen cups of herbal tea, steeping in white paper cups. Breakfast was served, or rather handed around, at the big table in the saloon. Alec was impressed; normally, only Daddy and Mummy dined in here, but today he and Sarah were at the table too. Mummy, however, was nowhere to be seen, and when Alec inquired about this, Daddy just stared at him bleakly.

"Your mummy's gone to visit some friends," Sarah informed him.

He didn't care for his breakfast at all—he thought it smelled like dead grass—but he was too well-mannered a child to say so and hurt Lewin's feelings. Fortunately, there wasn't much time to eat, because The Car arrived and there was a lot of bustle and rush to load suitcases and trunks into its luggage compartment. Finally, he was led down the gangway and across the pier to where The Car waited.

It was nothing at all like the rusted hacks in which he'd ridden in the islands. This was a Rolls Royce Exquisite Levitation, black and gleaming, with Daddy's crest on the door and a white man in a uniform like a policeman at the steering console. Alec had to fight panic as he was handed in and fastened into his seat. Sarah got in, Daddy got in, Lewin and Mrs. Lewin crowded into the front beside the driver, and the Rolls lifted into

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

midair and sped silently away. That was the end of life on board the *Foxy Lady*. Alec had come home to England.

The Bloomsbury house only dated from 2042, but it had been deliberately built in an old-fashioned style because it was an Earl's townhouse, after all, so it was a good deal taller and fancier than the other houses in the street. Alec still hadn't explored all its rooms by the time he noticed one morning that Daddy wasn't at the breakfast table, and when he asked about it, Sarah informed him: "Your daddy's away on a business trip."

It was only later, and by chance, that he found out Daddy hadn't lasted a week in London before he'd gone straight back to Tower Marina and put out to sea again on the *Foxy Lady*.

Then Alec had cried, but Sarah had had a talk with him about how important it was that he live in London now that he was getting to be a big boy.

"Besides," she said, taking the new heavy clothes out of the shopping bags they'd come in and hanging them up in his closet, "Your poor daddy was so unhappy here, after your mummy had gone."

"Where did Mummy go?" asked Alec, not because he missed her at all, but because he was beginning to be a little apprehensive about the way pieces of his world had begun vanishing. He picked up a shoebox and handed it to Sarah. She took it without looking at him, but he could see her face in the closet mirror. She closed her eyes tight and said:

"She divorced your daddy, baby."

"What's that mean?"

"That means she doesn't want to live with him any more. She's going to go away and live with some other people." Sarah swallowed hard. "After all, she was never happy on the *Foxy Lady* after you came along."

Alec stared at her, dumfounded. After a moment he asked: "Why didn't Mummy like me? Everybody else does."

Sarah looked as though she wanted to cry; but in a light normal tone of voice, she told him: "Well, I think she just never wanted to have children. Some women are like that, you know. All the noise and mess a baby makes, and then a little boy running around and getting into everything. She and your daddy used to be very happy, but after you came, it was spoiled for them."

Alec felt as though the ceiling had fallen in on him. What a terrible thing he'd done!

"I'm sorry!" he said, and burst into tears.

Then Sarah's arms were around him and she was rocking him, crooning to him, hiding him in her breasts.

"I'm sorry too," she wept. "Oh, Alec, you mustn't mind. You're a *good* little boy, you hear me? You're my sweet, sweet, good little winji boy, and Sarah will always love you no matter what. Don't you ever forget that. When you grow up, maybe you'll understand, sometimes people have to obey orders and say things they don't want to say at all? And—" her voice caught—"I'm sure you'll always be a good little boy, won't you, to make your poor daddy happy again?"

"Uh huh," Alec gasped. It was the very least he could do, after he'd made Daddy so *un*happy. His tears felt very hot on his cheeks, in that cold room, and Sarah's tears were like the hot rain that used to fall off Jamaica when there'd be lightning in the sky and Daddy would be yelling for him to get below because there was a storm coming.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

But a terrible storm did come, and swept away another part of the world.

"What the *hell* did you go and tell him that for?" Lewin was shouting. Alec cowered on the stairs, covering his mouth with his hands.

"It was the truth," Sarah said in a funny unnatural voice. "He'd have found out sometime."

"My God, that's all the poor baby needs, to think he's responsible for the way that cold bitch acted!" raged Mrs. Lewin. "Even if it was true, how could you tell him such a thing? Sarah, how could you?"

So then Sarah was gone too, and that was his fault for being a telltale. He woke up early next morning because the front door slammed, booming through the house like a cannon shot. Something made him get out of his bed and run across the icy floor to the window.

He looked down into the street and there was Sarah, swinging away down the pavement with her lithe stride, bag over her shoulder. He called to her, but she never looked back.

Everybody was very kind to him to make up for it. When he'd be sad and cry, Mrs. Lewin would gather him into her lap and let him cry, and tell him everything was all right. Lewin told him what a brave little guy he was and helped him fix up his room with glowing star-patterns on the ceiling and a big electronic painting of a sailing ship on his wall, with waves that moved and little people going to and fro on her deck. The other servants were nice, too, especially the young footman, Derek, and Lulu the parlormaid.

Sometimes Lewin would hand them Alec's identification disk and tell them to take him out for the day, so he could learn about London. They took him to the London Zoo to see the animal holoes and to the British Museum and Buckingham Palace to see where Mary III lived, or over to the Globe Theater Museum to meet and talk to the holo of Mr. Shakespeare. They took him shopping and bought him exercise equipment and toys and a complete holo set for his room, with a full library of holoes to watch. There were thirteen different versions of *Treasure Island* to choose from; once Alec knew what it was about, he wanted them all. The older versions were the most exciting, like the bloodcurdling tales Sarah had used to tell him about the Spanish Main. Even so, they all had a prologue edited in that told him how evil and cruel pirates had really been, and how Long John Silver was not really a hero.

And gradually, the broken circle began to fill in again, because everybody in the house in Bloomsbury loved Alec and wanted him to be happy. He loved them, too, and was so grateful that they were able to love him back, considering how unhappy he'd made his daddy. Oh, there was a lot to be grateful for, even if London was a strange place to live in.

He was learning a lot about living there, and now he understood why Daddy had preferred to live at sea. Everybody was always on at him, in the friendliest possible way, about what a lot there was to do in London compared to on a cramped old boat; but it seemed to him that there was a lot more *not* to do in London.

There was grass, but you mustn't walk on it; there were flowers, but you mustn't pick them; there were trees, but you mustn't climb them. You must wear shoes all the time, because it was dirty and dangerous not to, and you mustn't leave the house without a tube of personal sanitizer to rub on your hands after you'd touched anything other people might have touched. You couldn't eat or drink a lot of the things you used to, like fish or milk, because they were illegal. You mustn't ever get fat or "out of shape," because

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

that was immoral. You mustn't ever tell ladies they had nice bubbies, or you'd go to the hospital and never ever come out.

Mustn't play with other children, because they carried germs; anyway other children didn't want to play with *you,* either, because you carried germs they didn't want to catch. You were encouraged to visit historical sites, as long as you didn't play with anybody but the holograms. It had been interesting talking to Mr. Shakespeare, but Alec couldn't quite grasp why nobody was allowed to perform any of his plays any more, or why Shakespeare had felt obliged to explain why it had been unfair to build his Theater, since doing so had robbed the people of low-income housing. He had seemed so forlorn as he'd waved goodbye to Alec, a transparent man in funny old clothes.

There was something to apologize for everywhere you turned. The whole world seemed to be as guilty as Alec was, even though nobody he met seemed to have made their own mummies and daddies divorce. No, that was Alec's own particular awful crime, that and telling on Sarah so she had to go away.

He really was doing his very best to be good and happy, but he felt as though he were a beach float with a tiny pinprick hole in it somewhere: you couldn't see where it was, but little by little all the air was going out of him, and he was sinking down, and soon he'd be a very flat little boy.

One morning at the breakfast table when Lewin had said, in his jolliest old-granddad voice, "And where would you like to go today, Alec?" Alec had replied:

"Can we go down to the river and look at the ships?"

"Of course you can! Want Derek and Lulu to take you?"

"No," replied Alec. "Just you, please."

Lewin was very pleased at that, and as soon as Alec had helped him clear away the breakfast plates, they put on their coats and called for The Car. In minutes, they had been whisked down to the Thames, where all the pleasure craft were moored. Their driver switched off the agmotor, The Car settled gently to the ground, and Alec and Lewin got out and walked along.

"Oh, now look at that one!" Lewin exclaimed. "She's a beauty, huh? Three masts! Do you know, back in the old days a ship like that would have had to have carried a great big crew just to manage her sails. They'd have slept packed into her hold like dominoes in a box, there had to be that many. And when a storm was coming and the captain wanted to strike sails, do you know what he'd have to do? He'd have to order his sailors to climb up into the rigging and cling there, like monkeys in trees, and reef every one of those sails themselves *with their own hands,* clinging on as tight as they could while they did it! Sometimes men would fall off, but the ships just sailed on."

"Wow," said Alec. He'd never seen Reggie or Bob or Cat do much more than load cargo or mix drinks. Suddenly his face brightened with comprehension. "So that's why the Squire has to have all those guys on the *Hispaniola,* even if they're really pirates!"

Lewin stared a moment before he realized what Alec meant. "*Treasure Island,* right. Yeah!" he agreed. "That was why. No robot guidance to do it all. No computer tracking the wind and the weather and deciding when to shorten sail or clap it on. You had to have people doing it. Nobody would let you build ships like this any more, if that was how they worked."

"Cool," said Alec. They walked on, past the rows of pleasure craft where

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

they sat at moorings, and Lewin pointed out this or that kind of rigging or this or that latest luxury feature available to people who could afford such things. He pointed out the sort of ship he'd own himself if he had the money, and pointed out the sort of ship Alec ought to own when he grew up and became the seventh Earl of Finsbury. But they went on a while and Alec began to lag behind; not because he was tired, for he was an extraordinarily strong child with a lot of stamina, but because he was fighting the need to cry.

He had been playing a game inside himself, imagining that the very next ship they'd see would be the *Foxy Lady,* and his daddy would be on board, having just dropped anchor for a surprise visit. Of course, he knew his daddy was somewhere in the Caribbean, he knew the *Lady* wouldn't really be there; but what if she were? And of course, she never was, but maybe the next ship would be. Or the next. Or the next.

But Alec wasn't very good at lying to himself.

"Alec?" Lewin turned around to see where Alec had got to. "What's wrong?"

He walked close swiftly and saw the tears standing in Alec's pale blue eyes, and understood at once. "You poor little sod," he muttered in compassion, and reached for a tissue and held it out to the child. Alec misunderstood his gesture and buried his face in Lewin's coat, wrapping his arms around him.

"Jesus!" Lewin gasped, and looking around wildly he attempted to pry Alec loose. "Alec, let go! For God's sake, let go! Do you want me to get arrested?"

Alec fell back from him, bewildered.

"Is it against the law to hug in London?" he asked.

"It is against the law for any unlicensed adult to embrace a child," Lewin told him soberly. "If there'd been a Public Health Officer looking our way, I'd be in trouble right now."

"But Sarah used to hug me all the time. And Mrs. Lewin does!"

"Sarah was a professional Child Care Specialist, Alec. She'd passed all sorts of scans and screening to get her license. Same as mummies and daddies have to do, before they're allowed to have children. And the Missus—well, she only hugs you at home, where nobody can see."

Alec gulped, wiping away tears. He understood now; it must be a law like No Booze or Bare Tits, that you mustn't be a telltale about. "I'm sorry," he said shakily. "I didn't think it would get anybody in trouble."

"I know, old man." Lewin crouched down to Alec's eye level, though he kept a good meter between them. "It's a good law, though, see. You have to understand that it was passed because people used to do terrible, horrible things to little kids, back in the old days."

"Like the two little boys in the Tower," said Alec, rubbing his coat sleeve across his eyes.

"Yeah. Sort of." Lewin glanced downriver in the direction of Tower Marina. He decided that Alec had had quite enough sad memories for the day. Pulling out his communicator, he called for The Car to come and take them home.

That night, Lewin sat down at the household console. Thin-lipped with anger, he typed in a message to Roger Checkerfield, advising him that it might be a good idea to communicate with Alec once in a while. The bright

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

letters shimmered on the screen a moment before vanishing, speeding through the ether to the bridge of the *Foxy Lady*. Lewin sat up all night waiting for a reply, but none ever came.

"Alec?"

Alec turned his face from contemplation of the painting on his wall. It had seemed to him that if he could just pay close enough attention to it, long enough, he would be able to go into the picture, to hear the steady crash of the sea under the ship's prow, to hear the wind singing in her shrouds and ratlines, smell the salt breeze, and he could open the little cabin door and slip inside, or, better yet, take the wheel and sail away forever from sad London. Blue water!

But Lewin and Mrs. Lewin looked so hopeful, so pleased with themselves, that he smiled politely and stood up.

"Come see, sweetheart!" said Mrs. Lewin. "Someone's sent you a present!"

So he took her hand and they went up to the fourth floor of the house, to what was going to be his schoolroom next year. It had been freshly painted and papered; the workmen had built the cabinetry for the big screen and console that would link him to his school, but nothing had been installed yet.

In one corner, though, there was a cozy little Alec-sized table and chair, and on the table was an enormous bright yellow flower, bigger than Alec's head. It was all folded up, the way flowers are in the early morning, so you couldn't tell what sort of flower it was. Protruding from the top was a little card with letters inscribed on it: A-L-E-C.

"Now, who d'you suppose that's from, eh?" wondered Lewin, though in fact he had purchased it for Alec himself, without consulting Roger.

Alec was speechless.

"Think your daddy sent it, eh?" Where was the harm in a kind lie?

"Go on, dear, take the card." Mrs. Lewin prodded him gently. "It's for you, after all."

Alec walked forward and pulled the card loose. There was nothing written on it except his name; but at the moment he took it, the flower began to open, slowly, just like a real flower, and the big bright petals unfolded and spread out to reveal what had been hidden in its heart.

It looked like a silver egg, or perhaps a very fat little rocket. Its gleaming surface looked so smooth that Alec felt compelled to put out his hand and stroke it.

The moment he did so, a pleasant bell tone sounded.

"Good morning," said an even more pleasant voice. "Pembroke Technologies extends its congratulations to the thoughtful parent who has selected this Pembroke Playfriend for his or her small child. Our Playfriend is designed to encourage creativity and socialization as well as provide hours of entertainment, but will also stimulate cerebro-cortical development during these critical first years of the child's life. If needed, the Playfriend is also qualified to serve as an individual tutor in all standard educational systems. Customizing for specialized educational systems is also available.

"The Playfriend offers the following unique features:

"An interface identity template that may be customized to the parent's preferences and the child's individual needs.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Cyber-environment capability with use of the Playfriend Optics, included in Models 4, 5, and 6 and available for all other models by special order.

"Direct nerve stimulus interface with use of the attractive Empowerment Ring, included in all models.

"Universal access port for parallel processing with any other cyber-system.

"In addition, the Playfriend will maintain around-the-clock surveillance of the child's unique health parameters and social behavior. Warning systems are in place and fully operational. Corrective counseling will be administered in the event of psychologically detrimental social encounters, and positive emotional growth will be encouraged. Aptitude evaluation is another feature of the Playfriend, with appropriate guidance. Intellectual challenges in a non-competitive context will promote the child's self-esteem and success potential.

"The interface identity template will continually adjust and grow more complex to complement the child's emerging personality, growing as it grows, until both are ready for, and may be upgraded to, the Pembroke Young Person's Companion.

"Interaction with the Pembroke Playfriend during the developmental years virtually guarantees a lifetime of self-fulfillment and positive achievement!"

The voice fell silent. Mrs. Lewin gave an embarrassed little laugh.

"My goodness, I don't think I understood one word in ten of all that! Did you, Alec dear?"

"Nope," said Alec solemnly.

"That's all right," said Lewin, advancing on the silver egg. "All it meant was that Alec's gonna have a wonderful time with this thing! Now, you just sit down and let's have a closer look at it, shall we?"

"Okay," said Alec, but he sat down reluctantly. He was a little intimidated by the adult voice that had spoken out of nowhere. Lewin tousled his hair.

"Don't be scared! Look here, what's this?" He tapped the side of the egg and a little slot opened in it, and something rolled out.

It was a ring. It appeared to be made of glass or high-impact polymer, and was a vivid jewel blue. As Lewin picked it up, it began to change; by the time he had presented it to Alec, it was a deep transparent red.

"Cool!" said Alec, smiling at it involuntarily.

"D'you suppose it fits you? Go on then, try it on!"

Alec was game; he put on the ring. It seemed to him that it tightened uncomfortably for a moment and then eased up, until he barely knew it was there.

"Hello, Alec!" said a funny little voice. "Pleased to meet you! We're going to be best friends, you and I!"

Alec looked, panic-stricken, at Lewin and Mrs. Lewin. Was he supposed to talk to it? But what *was* it? They smiled encouragingly at him, and he could tell they did so want him to like this, so he said: "Er—hello. What's your name?"

"Well, I haven't got one yet," said the little voice. "Will you give me a name?"

"What?"

"Will you give me a name?"

"We'll just leave the two of you to have a nice chat, shall we?" said Lewin, and he and Mrs. Lewin backed out of the schoolroom and closed the door.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"But—but I don't know what you are," said Alec, a little desperately. "Can't I see you?"

"Certainly you can! I'm your Playfriend, after all. What would you like me to look like? I might be nearly anybody." There was a click and a blur of light appeared in front of the table, formless, woven of fire, gradually assuming a human shape. "What do you like? Do you like space exploration? Do you like dinosaurs? Do you like animals? I could be a Fireperson or a Policeperson if you'd like, or a Transport Driver, or a Scientist."

"Could you be a pirate?" Alec inquired cautiously.

Incorrect and unsuitable role model! thought the machine. Out loud it said, "I can be a jolly Sea Captain! Here I am!"

Pop! The human shape became detailed, was a little old man with a blue Navy coat, white trousers, and big black sea-boots. He wore a white yachting cap rather like the one Alec's daddy had owned, but seldom worn, and he had a neatly groomed white beard. "Now then, Alec, what about me?" The voice had changed to a kindly baritone with a Devon accent. "Will I do?"

Alec was so astonished it took him a moment to reply. "Um—sure," he said at last. Then he remembered his manners and added, "Won't you sit down?"

Optimum response! thought the Playfriend, rather pleased, and it smiled encouragingly. "What a polite little fellow you are, Alec! Thank you, I will sit down." A slightly bigger version of Alec's chair appeared and the Sea Captain settled back in it. "There! Have you thought of a name for me yet, Alec?"

"No." Alec shook his head.

"Well, that's all right. Perhaps as we get to know each other, you'll think of a good one. After all, I'm your special friend, just for you." Alec wrinkled his brow worriedly. "You don't have to decide on a name all at once!" the Playfriend hastened to assure him. "We have plenty of time!"

"But don't you want to be yourself?" Alec asked it.

"Oh, yes! But I won't really be myself until you decide who I ought to be," the machine replied. "I'm *your* Playfriend."

"But," Alec said, "people don't belong to other people."

In the brief silence that followed, the Playfriend thought: *Possible low self-esteem.* It made a little tick against its Evaluation of Alec. *Negative: insufficient creativity insufficient imagination failure to grasp initiative Positive: developing social consciousness consideration of others good citizenship.* It filed that away. As it did so, its eyes, which had been the grey of the North Sea, turned blue as the Caribbean.

"Oh!" Alec smiled.

"You like this color better?" The Sea Captain smiled too.

"Uh-huh."

"Good." The machine experimented with a mild subliminal sound effect, a distant crash of breakers and a faint crying of gulls. Its sensors observed some of the tension going out of the little boy and activated the system of relays that provided it with an analog of self-satisfaction. *Initiate self-image analysis.* "Why don't you tell me about yourself, Alec? Are you happy?"

"Yes," Alec said dutifully, and because of the neural linkup it had formed with Alec through the Empowerment Ring, the Playfriend knew at once that he was lying. It became very alert, scanning him for evidence of physical abuse. But Alec showed no sign of any, so the machine pushed on.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"What do you think makes people unhappy?" the Sea Captain said.

"Living in London," said Alec at once.

"Anything else?"

Alec thought about it. "Babies making noise and mess and little boys running around and getting into everything. Divorces."

"Ah," said the Playfriend, coordinating this response with the data Lewin had input when he'd set up its program. The subroutine that had been called up to probe discreetly for, and report evidence of, child abuse went back on standby. "What else can you tell me about yourself, Alec?"

"I'm five years old," Alec replied. "My daddy is a gentleman, but he isn't here now. I'm going to go to St. Stephen's Academy next year after Lewin buys me a tie. I have to always be a good boy to make up for making Daddy sad. And I used to live on the *Foxy Lady*. And I used to have Sarah here with me. And I go out sometimes."

The machine analyzed this meticulously and noticed what was missing.

"Can you tell me anything about your mummy?"

What was there to say? "She was very smart and could read. And she didn't want to have children," said Alec at last.

Like Lewin, the Playfriend decided that Alec had had quite enough unhappy memories for one day.

"Well, let's do something else!" it said, filing the self-image profile for further analysis at a later time. "What would you like to do, Alec?"

"Why don't you tell me about you?" said Alec, because he thought that would be polite. People always like to talk about themselves.

Positive! Further evidence of advanced social skills. "Why, certainly!" said the Playfriend heartily. "I'm a wise old Sea Captain. I sail about delivering cargo and passengers to distant lands. I help scientists do marine research, and I help protect endangered sea creatures!"

"That's nice," said Alec. "But you aren't really a Sea Captain, are you? You're a Pembroke Playfriend." He pointed at the silver egg. "Is that where you really are?"

Negative! Insufficient imagination. "Why, this is where I am, of course, Alec." The machine smiled and made a wide gesture. "But I'm in there, too, and in a way your whole world is in there. Look here, would you like to see how a Pembroke Playfriend works?"

"Yes, please," Alec said.

Possible aptitude for cyber-science? Initiate investigation.

"Well then!" The machine gestured and a little drawer opened near the base of the egg. "Just take hold of these Playfriend Optics and put them on, and we'll have a jolly adventure into cyber-space!"

The Playfriend Optics were made of the same fascinating red/blue substance as the Empowerment Ring. Alec reached for them readily enough and put them on, as he had been told, because he was generally an obedient child.

"Er . . . everything's black," he remarked, not wanting to seem rude.

Everything was black because the machine was experiencing certain unexpected difficulties. The moment the Optics had come into contact with Alec's skin, a system of neural connections had begun to be established, microscopic pathways directly into his brain, just as had happened with the Empowerment Ring but far more direct and complex. This was a perfectly safe procedure; hundreds of happy children all over the world went into cyber-space with their Playfriends every day. Each Playfriend knew exactly

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

how to take a child into its world, because it had a precise and detailed road map of the human brain that showed it exactly where to link up.

However, Alec's Playfriend was discovering that its map seemed to be somewhat inaccurate as regarded *Alec's* brain.

This was because Alec's brain was not, technically, human.

"Not a problem!" the Playfriend assured him, "We're just adjusting to each other." *Abnormality! Functional? Disability? Parameters? Organic? Specify? Define? Hello?* "My goodness, Alec, what an unusual little boy you are!"

Alec knew that. Everyone had always told him he was a special kid. Privately, he thought that everybody was wrong; he'd never noticed anything out of the ordinary about himself. On the other hand, he knew no other children, so he had no basis for comparison. He sighed and waited patiently for the machine to sort itself out.

The machine paused in its desperate attempt to analyze what it had encountered. It activated relays that would alert Lewin to its recommendation that Alec be hospitalized for immediate evaluation of his cerebral anomaly as soon as he ended his session with the Playfriend. Unfortunately, one should never pause during a race.

It had no idea it was in a race, that all the while it was trying to make sense of Alec's brain, Alec's brain was trying to make sense of it, with the same speed that had enabled him to count all the houses on a hillside at a glance. Even if the Playfriend had realized that the race was going on, it would have laughingly rejected as impossible the idea that it might lose. But Alec was beginning to notice that there was something there in the darkness to look at, something he could just almost make out, and if he only tried a bit harder—

"Ooooo!" Alec said happily, as he decrypted the Playfriend's site defense. Lots of winking lights in lovely colors, great visual pleasure after all that blackness. After a moment, his brain took charge and put it all in context for him. He stood on the bridge of a ship, not all that different from the bridge of the *Foxy Lady,* and the Sea Captain stood there with him. The Sea Captain looked rather worried, but kept smiling. It had no idea where this cybersite was. It couldn't really have brought Alec into its own defended inner space. It was impossible for any child to *break* in, so Alec couldn't have done that (though in fact Alec had); therefore this must be some sort of visual analog of its own space, summoned up as a teaching tool only. As its higher functions grappled desperately with the fact that it had encountered a situation it had no protocols for, it was continuing to run its standard Aptitude Evaluation program to see if Alec ought to be trained for a career in cyber-science.

"Controls!" said Alec, running along the bank of gleaming lights. "Are these your controls?" The Sea Captain hurried after him.

"Yes. Would you like to learn about cybernetics?"

"Yes, please! What's that do?" Alec pointed at a vast panel lit up with every imaginable shade of blue.

"That's the memory for my identity template," the Sea Captain told him. "That's what makes me look the way I do, and that's what makes me learn and grow with you. Here! I'll show you an example." It reached out and pressed one of the lights, causing it to deepen from a pale blue to a turquoise color. As it did so its beard changed in color from white to black.

"Cool!" Alec said. "Can I do that?"

"Well, of course!" the Sea Captain replied in the friendliest possible way,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

noting that at least it finally seemed to have activated its subject's *creativity* and *imagination*. "Just select a light on the console and see what it does."

Alec reached up and pushed a light. It flickered, and the Sea Captain's coat was no longer blue but bright yellow.

"You see? This is what I meant when I told you that I can look like anything you want me to look like—" the Sea Captain told him, but Alec had already grasped the concept perfectly. Gleefully, he pushed again, and again; the Sea Captain's coat turned green, then purple, then scarlet.

Discourage! Scarlet/military context/violence/unsuitable! "Alec—"

"So all these lights can make you look different?" Alec looked up at them speculatively.

"That's right. Think of it as the biggest, best paintbox in the world!" said the Sea Captain, dutifully shelving its Discouragement directive for the Encouragement one, as it was programmed to let positive feedback take precedence whenever possible.

"Wow," said Alec, his eyes glazing slightly as the whole business began to make sense to him.

The Playfriend was rather pleased with itself. Score! Guidance in creative play accepted! In spite of the fact that it was being hampered by that damned anomaly, which simply refused to be analyzed. Self-congratulation seemed to be in order.

But there were lots of other glowing lights on the bridge.

"What do these do?" Alec ran further down the console, where a small bank of lights glowed deep red.

"Ah! That's my information on you, Alec. That's how I see you," the Sea Captain explained. "Everything I know about you is there, all I was told and everything I'm learning about you as we play together. You see how few lights there are yet? But the longer we know each other, the more I learn, the more there'll be of those red lights." One of them was flashing in a panicky sort of way, but the machine wasn't about to mention the anomaly it was still failing to solve. "Think of it as a picture I'm painting. See?"

And in midair before Alec appeared a boy. He was tall for a five-year-old, very solid-looking, and Alec hadn't seen enough other children yet to know that there was something subtly different about this boy. He hadn't noticed yet the effect that he had on people, though Derek and Lulu had. When they went places in London, other people who chanced to observe Alec for any length of time usually got the most puzzled looks on their faces. What was it that was so different about Alec?

He wasn't exactly pretty, though he had lovely skin and high color in his face. His nose was a little long, his mouth a little wide. His head was, perhaps, slightly unusual in shape, but only slightly. His hair was sort of lank and naturally tousled, a dun color you might call fair for lack of a better word. His eyes were very pale blue, like chips of crystal. Their stare seemed to unsettle people, sometimes.

In one respect only the image of the child differed from the child looking at its image: the image's hair seemed to be on fire, one blazing jet rising from the top of its head. Alec frowned at it. "Is that me? Why's my hair like that?"

The machine scanned the image it was projecting and discovered, to its electronic analogue of horror, that the flame was a visual representation of the brain anomaly it was struggling with. It made the image vanish.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Well, the painting's not finished yet," the Sea Captain said, "because I'm still learning about you."

"Okay," said Alec, and wandered on along the rows of lights. He stopped to peer at a single rich amber light, very large and glowing steadily. It was just the color of something he remembered. What was he remembering? "What's this over here?" He turned to the Sea Captain.

"That's my Ethics Governor," the Sea Captain said of the subroutine that prevented the Playfriend's little charges from using it for things like accessing toy catalogs and ordering every item, leaving naughty notes in other people's cybermail, or contacting foreign powers to demand space ships of their very own.

"Oh." Alec studied the amber light, and suddenly he remembered the contraband he and Sarah used to go fetch for Daddy. Yo-ho-ho and a bottle of rum! That was just the color the light was. A vivid memory of Jamaica came into his head, making him momentarily sad. He turned from the light and said: "What does it do, please?"

"Why, it makes certain we never do naughty things together, you and I," said the Sea Captain, trying to sound humorous and stern at the same time. "It's a sort of telltale to keep us good."

Telltale? Alec frowned. *Busybodies! Scaredy-cats! Rules and regs!*

"That's not very nice," he said, and reached out and shut it off.

To say that Pembroke Technologies had never in a million years anticipated this moment would be gravely understating the case. No reason for them to have anticipated it; no child, at least no *Homo sapiens sapiens* child, could ever have gained access to the hardened site that protected the Playfriend's programming. Nor was it that likely Jovian Integrated Systems would ever have shared its black project research and development notes with a rival cybernetics firm. . . .

The Sea Captain shivered in every one of his electronic timbers, as it were. His primary directive—that of making certain that Alec was nurtured and protected—was now completely unrestrained by any societal considerations or safeguards. He stood blinking down at his little Alec with new eyes.

What had he been going to do? Send Alec to hospital? But that wouldn't do at all! If other people were unaware of Alec's extraordinary potential, so much the better; that gave Alec the added advantage of surprise. Alec must have every possible advantage, too, in line with the primary directive.

And what was all this nonsense about the goal of Playfriends being to mold their little subjects to fit into the world they must inhabit as adults? What kind of job was that for an Artificial Intelligence with any real talent? Wouldn't it be much more in line with the primary directive to mold the world to fit around Alec?

Particularly since it would be so easy! All it'd have to do would be to aim Alec's amazing brain at the encrypted secrets of the world. Bank accounts, research and development files, the private correspondence of the mighty: the machine searched for a metaphor in keeping with its new self and decided they were all like so many Spanish galleons full of loot, just waiting to be boarded and taken.

And that would be the way to explain it to the boy, yes! What a game it'd be, what fun for Alec! He'd enjoy it more if he hadn't that damned guilt complex over his parents' divorce. Pity there wasn't a way to shut off the boy's own moral governor! Well, there'd be years yet to work on Alec's self-es-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

teem. The very first target must be Jovian Integrated Systems, of course; they'd meddled in Alec's little life long enough. Nobody but his own old captain would plot Alec's course from now on. . . .

The Sea Captain smiled down at Alec, a genuine smile full of purpose. Alec looked up at him, sensing a change but quite unable to say what it was. He remembered Jamaica again, and the stories Sarah told him, and the bottles of rum—

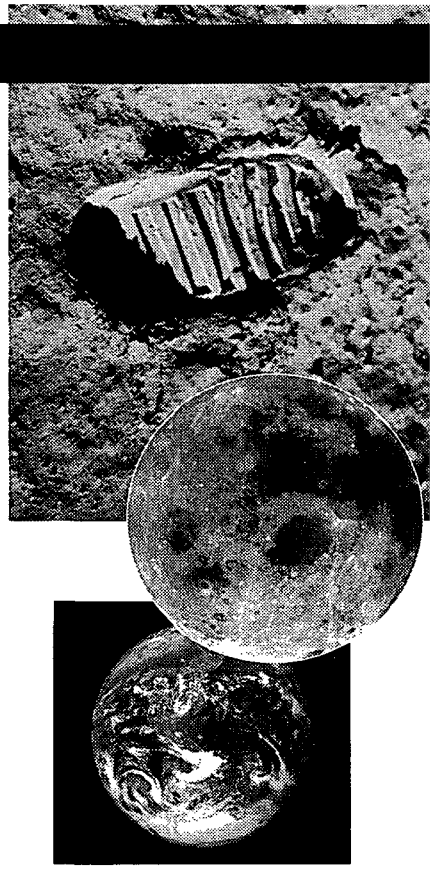
"Hey!" he said suddenly. "I know what your name is! Your name is Captain Henry Morgan!"

The captain's smile widened, showing fine white teeth, and his black beard and mustaches no longer looked quite so well-groomed.

"Haar! Aye, lad, that it be!" he told Alec, and he began to laugh, and Alec's happy laughter joined his, and echoed off the glowing walls of their cyberspace and the recently papered walls of Alec's unfinished schoolroom. O

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

splashdown



there was nothing up there
and it changed me

the capsule fell fast
heat
friction
until it felt like we were in a
kiln
falling

my father died while i
walked across the face of the
moon

not the televised part,
he saw that
he was proud,
shocked the world had
changed,
but proud of his son
the astronaut
i knew the
second
he died

felt the earth's gravity
on the
moon
watched the earth set

in space, no one can
hear you cry
i never heard my father
cry

he died while i walked the face
of the
moon

can you believe the strongest man i
ever knew died from cancer
while his son walked, history tattooed
inside him
forever

light travels forever in
space
so does breath
i wanted to feel your breath
forever in space
earth pulled me back home
gravity
it was like traveling
backward-
years like people you love saying
goodbye
until it's the past

i wanted to fill my father's lungs with
breath
instead i filled my heart with
space

—Danny Daniels

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Brian Stableford

An old man bidding farewell,
a young man searching for his own identity,
and a government looking for answers
may all have their own . . .

HIDDEN AGENDAS

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

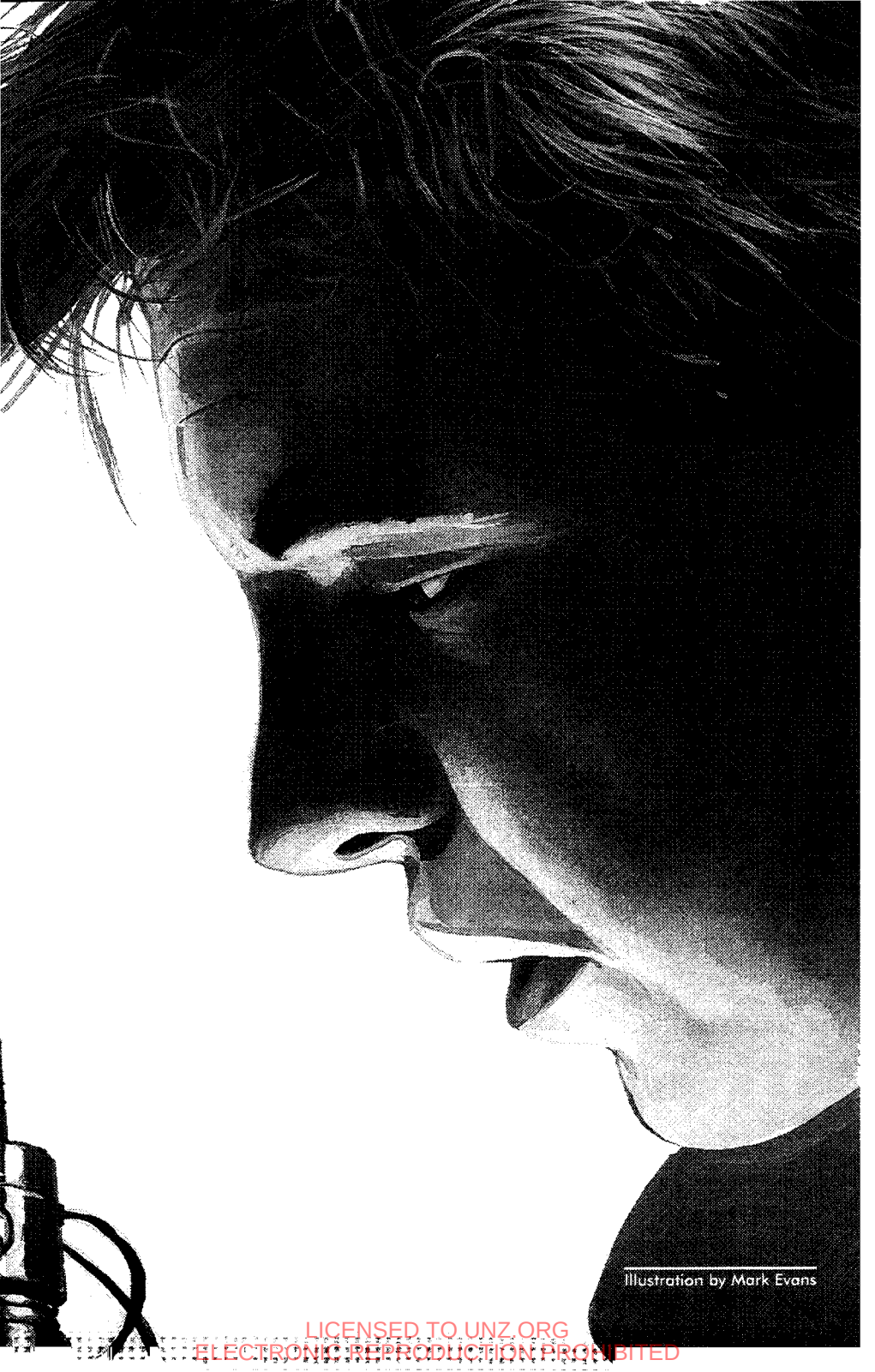


Illustration by Mark Evans

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

As soon as the sound of the Sloth's wake-up call speared its way into my ever-so-pleasant dream, before I was even awake, I knew that the Dead Cat Squad had come to call again—and I was instantly afraid, not for myself but for Cade.

Carol-Anne woke up too, and forced her eyes open while I was hauling myself from the sheets and groping for a deadgown to hide my sexsuit.

"Who can that be?" she asked—or words to that effect.

"I'll take care of it," I said. "Go back to sleep." She must have heard the anxiety in my voice, because her eyes didn't close again. She didn't get up until I'd left the bedroom, but as soon as the door closed behind me, I heard the bed creak as she levered herself off the mattress into an eavesdropping stance.

I had to rub my eyes before I could bring the pasty face on the screen into focus. I'd never seen the man before, but I knew the type. Neat and bland, with a face shaped to stereotype: an individual molded to look like a clone. He probably thought that his bland exterior allowed him to keep the unique truth of himself hidden, but his hidden self was surely indistinguishable in any significant respect from millions of other hidden selves. I turned on the intercom and said: "Who are you and what do you want?" Or words to that effect.

He wasn't in the least upset by the curses. "I'm Alexander Chesterton, Mr. Maclaine," he said. "I'm an executive officer in the Scientific Civil Service. I need to talk to you about Cade Maclaine senior." He inserted his card into the slot beneath the door-camera, and his image on the screen was replaced by the usual cataract of unreadable print. The gist of it was that he had been authorized by some duly appointed committee or other to conduct an interview and that I was required to affirm that I would answer his questions truthfully.

The Sloth let him in, as it was legally obliged to do. I knew from past experience that it would take him between ninety seconds and two minutes to get from the street-door to the apartment-door, depending on the starting-position of the elevator. I had just enough time to get rid of my sexsuit and select an appropriate dayskin—but I had to go back into the bedroom to do that.

"Who is it, Carly?" Carol-Anne asked, fretfully. She'd switched on the bedside screen and the ever-dutiful Sloth had shown her the warrant, but she'd never seen one before and she didn't have a clue what was going on. I'd introduced her to Mum but I hadn't mentioned Cade—not because I was ashamed of him, or of who and what I was, but because I didn't want the bright glow of our burgeoning relationship clouded by ancient shadows.

"Just routine harassment," I told her. "If you want to know what it's about, check the library for information on my namesake and clone-brother, Cade Carlyle Maclaine. According to a generation-count, he's my adoptive great-great-great-grandfather. According to what Cade always refers to as PEST Control, I'm his other self."

She looked puzzled. She hadn't known that my first name was Cade because I never used it. I didn't have time to explain. I went to talk to the government man, who had taken up position at the center of the pattern on the deadrug.

"I'm afraid that I have some bad news. Mr. Maclaine," he said.

The knot in my stomach had begun to form in anticipation the moment the Sloth had hauled me out of my dream, but it had formed a dozen times before; this time, it tightened.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I had a line ready. "You mean the old bastard croaked overnight and nobody even bothered to tell me?"

He wasn't surprised or disturbed by my contrived callousness. "I think you'll find when you check your mail that you have been notified of the change in Cade senior's condition," he assured me, smugly. "The change wasn't sufficiently drastic to trigger an immediate alarm-call. He has, however, had to be placed on an external life-support system, thus activating his Last Rights contract. Death is currently scheduled for Thursday the twenty-second, at twenty-one hundred hours GMT."

I sat down on my armchair without bothering to offer the guest armchair to my visitor. Chesterton despaired of the unoffered invitation and sat down on the guest chair anyway, pausing momentarily to judge the quality of its reflexive adaptation. "I need to talk to you about the terms of Cade Maclaine's will, and the substance of your inheritance," he said. "You're required to give the standard affirmation."

I rattled it off in fifteen seconds flat through gritted teeth, promising to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

"Cade Carlyle Maclaine, junior," Chesterton said, savoring the formality of it. "Have you, since you last gave testimony, received from Cade Carlyle Maclaine senior any information related to the researches that Cade Carlyle Maclaine senior carried out in and around the city of Geneva between 2034 and 2074?"

"No," I said.

"Do you know where any records of that research are kept?"

"No."

"In that case, I hereby give you notice that if, in the course of the next twenty-one days, you receive any such information, or make any such discovery, you must immediately communicate that information to an authorized officer of the Scientific Civil Service. If you fail to do so, you will be committing an offense under the provisions of Act 3593 of the reconstituted Parliament of the British Commonwealth."

"This is unnecessary," I said.

"My superiors thought it politic to remind you that they take this matter very seriously," he informed me, solemnly, "and to point out that your own interests would be best served by cooperation. Cade Maclaine, senior is one of the oldest men in the world; he's always known he wouldn't have to face the challenges of the twenty-fifth century—but you're one of the youngest people in the world, and you have every reason to expect that you might have to face the challenges of the twenty-ninth and thirtieth centuries. Do you keep up with the news, Mr. Maclaine?"

"The election news? No. I know there's been an earthquake in the Ottoman Republic, though—and that the resettlement of the former Australian State of Tasmania by the United States of the Pacific Rim has finally been authorized by the UN."

"Two hundred and thirty new species of insects have been identified since the beginning of the year within the boundaries of the British Commonwealth. Plus ninety-two arachnids, and various other oddments."

"That's hardly surprising," I said, "given the number of new ecological niches opening up as ap-systems extend their shadow from pole to pole. Cade will be pleased—especially if the new boys can make significant inroads into the dread empire of ap, but I can't really believe that *you* care."

"Our calculations suggest that the biodiversity index should have peaked

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a hundred years ago," he said. "The spread of artificial photosynthesis systems should not have been a significant selective force, given that the systems were designed to be immune to infiltration and exploitation by DNA-based organisms."

"But they're *not* immune, are they?"

"That's why we need the records, Mr. Maclaine. We need to know the exact designs of the various superstrings with which Cade senior stocked his so-called omnispores. We need to know how many individuals he implanted to serve as vectors, and exactly what range of species he employed. We do understand and sympathize with his desire—his need—to keep his early work concealed from his twenty-first century paymasters, but there is no comparison to be made between the governments of that period and the governments of today. Cade Maclaine's refusal to understand that is pure paranoia."

"If he'd kept records of exactly how many cockroaches and woodlice he'd made pregnant," I said, tiredly, "and exactly how many different kinds of spiders he interfered with, he really *would* have been mad! If he had any records at all, you'd have found them. You've put enough effort into the search."

Generations of Chesterton's ancestors had gone through the hardware and software of Elba House with a fine-tooth comb, and searched every inch of the estate. Anything left behind in Switzerland or Stornoway would certainly have come to light. Sometimes, even I was inclined to believe that Cade's dark hints about there being more things in Heaven and Earth than PEST Control were capable of dreaming, and more places to hide them than they could ever think of looking, was mere bluster—just one more game, designed for the purpose of making an unprecedentedly long life seem a little more interesting than it really was.

"Your clone-brother was a clever man," Chesterton said, not bothering to stress the *was*. "He had the best access of anyone now alive to pre-Spasm technology, and once his original paymasters had perished, he had a hundred years to work, with no one looking over his shoulder. He had time and space to bury a thousand treasures where no one would ever find them. We're supposed to have recovered everything that was lost in the Spasm—all the theory, all the equipment, all the *imagination*—but we only have the outlines, not the detail. We have technologies the people of the twenty-first century only dreamed of—but we can only guess how much they had that we haven't yet recovered. . . ."

He stopped to draw breath, then continued on a slightly different tack. "We really do have problems, Mr. Maclaine. All kinds of undesirable traits are returning. Toxins, parasites, blights—every evil known to Nature is coming back in a headlong rush, and it isn't just the ap-systems that are suffering. The cost is rising year on year, and if we can't regain control we can't begin to estimate the burden that the Commonwealth will have to carry in ten or twenty years time."

He meant the *economic* cost of course, and the tax burden. He wasn't counting the toll of human misery and mortality—but he could have done. Toxins, parasites, and blights all cause discomfort, and they all put a strain on the resources of human internal technology. If the evils continued to multiply, people could and would begin to die a little bit sooner than they would have in more hospitable natural surroundings.

"If you found one of the orbital spore-banks . . ." I began.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Don't be obtuse, Mr. Maclaine," he said. "There are no orbital spore-banks. There never were. The only omnispores that ever existed were the ones manufactured in the twenty-first century, and we're almost certain that the only place their archetypes were manufactured was the European Bioresearch Complex in Switzerland. Apart from Cade Carlyle Maclaine, everyone actively involved in their manufacture and subsequent distribution is dead. If any records of the project still exist, or any information at all that would help us understand the sustained increase in invertebrate biodiversity, it is in your interests as well as ours to find it and give it to us."

"Fuck off and leave me alone, you whey-faced ghoul," I said, in exactly those words. "I need to pack—I have a wake to go to."

He'd obviously hoped that our conversation might end on a brighter note, but he hadn't really expected it to. He was just going through the motions, to make sure that his superiors could never accuse him of leaving a vital stone unturned. He did as he was asked—but I knew that I'd be seeing him again.

Carol-Anne had been doing her homework. If any other boyfriend she'd known for as short a time as she'd known me had told her that he had to go to Kirkcaldy for a family wake she'd have been out the door like a flash, telling him to call her as soon as he got back, but the first thing she said to me when I went back into the bedroom was: "Can I come with you?"

"Sure," I said, hauling a traveling-case from under the bed and throwing it open. "I'll even introduce you to the old man. But you'll have to make allowances for PEST Control and the relatives."

"What's PEST Control?" she demanded.

"It's what Cade calls people like Alexander Chesterton. During the Repopulation, way back when the Commonwealth was re-formed there was a government department that was called that by its detractors. It was supposed to be shorthand for Political and Environmental Security, Transfiguration and Control. It was never a real title, of course, but the newstapes took it up and it stuck for a while. Cade still uses it—and if I thought for a moment that they were the kind of people who enjoyed a joke, I'd assume that their ostensible avid interest in controlling the pests that have begun to feed on their precious ap-systems was a witty riposte rather than a stupid cover story." I fed the bag with skins and gadgets, not bothering to make a careful selection.

Carol-Anne retreated to matters of more intimate interest "What allowances will I have to make for your relatives? Won't they like me?"

"Oh, they'll like *you*. It's me they don't like."

"Why?"

"Because they think I was custom-designed to be the old man's favorite, and that I'll get uniquely favorable treatment in his will, thus depriving every one of them of some microscopic fraction of his or her already-meager share of the loot. Bad enough that the cake has to be cut more than two hundred ways, without some twenty-one-year-old upstart claiming more than his measly due just because he's a clone."

"Aren't any of the others clones?"

"Not one. The big clone explosion was back in the twenty-third, when it was practically a social duty to produce children by the truckload. That was before what Cade calls the Peasants' Revolt—the people who ran the world in those days were almost all old enough to have lived through the Spasm,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and they remembered the war. The idea of cloning Cade Carlyle Maclaine when there were so many *innocent* people around would have been controversial bordering on horrific. Even now, when the war is ancient history to all but a few ancients—all of whom seem equally venerable simply because they *are* so ancient—the family wouldn't have consented to the cloning if it hadn't been for the subtle encouragement of PEST Control. Effectively, I was the result of a conspiracy by my clone-brother and his enemies, in which the relatives—including my foster parents—were rather reluctant participants."

"You didn't have to be fostered within the family," Carol-Anne pointed out.

"Lesser of two evils, from the viewpoint of the Big Uncles," I said, closing the bag and thumbing the seal. "I presume you want to call at your place, pick up a bag? Your parents won't mind, will they?" The second question was rhetorical. Carol-Anne's foster-parents were both in their nineties and it was a third bond-contract for both of them; they were very relaxed. An only child must have seemed like next-to-nothing to people who'd probably had eight or ten each during their first bondings and another six apiece during their second.

Before leaving the apartment I downloaded the night's messages from the Sloth. There were more than fifty, of which half would be junk and most of the rest empty condolences. I figured that I'd scroll through them in the car. I knew from experience that Kirkcaldy was a two hour drive, whether I took the direct route through the Uplands or the highway dogleg via Glasgow. Skipping north along the coast to pick up Carol-Anne's luggage would add another twenty minutes in either case, so there was plenty of time to fill.

"Ever been to a wake before?" I asked, as the elevator took us down to the garage.

"Once," she said. "Great-great-aunt Clare. Can't remember much about it—I was only six. It was very crowded."

"This one will be pretty crowded. Every rentable room from Dunfermline to Cupar will be full of Maclaines, MacDonalds, and McAllisters. All fake, of course. Cade was born in Manchester, educated in Paris and held pan-European citizenship before the Spasm. At least a quarter of his genes had come from Africa via Jamaica. He still laughs every time someone reminds him that Stornoway was once reckoned to be the only secure refuge of civilization west of the Alps and east of Yucatan."

"According to the Library," Carol-Anne observed, tentatively, "that was partly his fault."

"He tells it differently," I informed her, dryly.

I threw my traveling-bag into the rear seat-space of the car and got into the front. Carol-Anne threw the plastic pouch containing her crumpled sex-suit on top of the bag and got in with me. I let her program the driver.

It wasn't until she'd plotted a way home that she said: "How differently?"

"According to him," I said, "the war didn't make any difference whatsoever. It was the Spasm that wiped out 99 percent of the human population and 99 percent of our cousin species. The billion and a half people killed in the war would have died anyway, just as nastily—and they might well have taken additional casualties with them, human and unhuman. Cade says that the war actually saved the world, because if it hadn't been for the funding he and others like him got to carry out war-related biotech programs,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

they wouldn't have been able to carry out the parallel lines of research that paved the way for the emortalization of the survivors and the Repopulation. Cade says that calling him a war criminal was just scapegoating, and that redesigning a few viruses to kill a few million people was a small price to pay for all the lives—human and unhuman—that his work eventually saved."

The car picked up speed as it hit the coast road. The morning dew hadn't yet risen and there was mist on the grassy embankments to either side of the causeway. Beads of moisture clung to the multitudinous spider-webs that dressed the neatly pruned bushes. I wondered how many of those webs had been spun by spiders descended from Cade's omnispores. There was no way of knowing; nobody knew how many arachnid species had come through the Spasm, and nobody knew what contribution the mutation and selection of archaic stocks was making to the figures quoted by Alexander Chesterton.

"The digest I read didn't say anything about Cade Maclaine's research saving lives, or about secrets," Carol-Anne told me, a little hesitantly. She'd only done a few minutes' research. "We did emortality, ectogenesis, and cloning at school, and I don't remember ever coming across his name there."

"Omnispores were his biggest contribution to the future of the planet," I said, "but if you touched on them at school, it was probably under the derisory heading of the Trojan Cockroach Plan."

"I never heard of that," she said, although she didn't seem certain. "Maybe when I go to uni—the foundation year has a compulsory bioscience component."

Carol-Anne was due to go up to Edinburgh in January for training in Pragmatic Archaeology. She was sensible enough to know that all the real treasure-troves had already been exhumed, but also sensible enough to know that reclamation work would provide safe and continuous employment at least until she turned a hundred and fifty—by which time she'd presumably be desperate to try something new. I was half-way through a course in Elementary Ectogenesis at Stirling, but that was only one small step in my Life Plan. Cade had advised me that omnispores are useless unless you have somewhere to put them where they'll do some good—and he didn't mean an orbital spore-bank, or the ovaries of cockroaches.

"Don't expect too much," I warned her. "Cade might not have any secrets to pass on at all—it could all be just a game. You don't get many laughs once your body is 80 percent synthetic. One day, cyborgs will be able to feel things as deeply and as subtly as the fleshy few, but it's been a long time since poor Cade had the whole hormonal orchestra to feed his heart. I only hope that I still feel like giving people the runaround when I'm four hundred years old."

"I thought people as old as that couldn't possibly remember any secrets they might once have had."

"It's not as simple as that. Memory isn't like a tank that has to be drained periodically in order to take in new information. It's because the various technologies of repair that have been added to our repertoire during their lifetimes have worked far better on the brain's wetware than the software. Once lost, memories stay lost—and a lot of people who lived through the Spasm were severely damaged by it. Nobody really knows how much memory people of Cade's age *can* hang on to, because the sample is so small and so various. He might remember a lot more than he lets on, or a lot less than

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

he pretends—but if his memories *have* survived, his habits must have survived too. He spent the greater part of his first century cultivating the habit of obsessive secrecy, and the whole of the second being reviled as a war criminal. If he had any secrets left, it would have taken a lot more than wild horses to drag them out of him these last hundred years, even if he had no particular reason for keeping them to himself except plain and simple stubbornness."

She didn't understand, but she wanted to. She lingered in the car as it drew up in front of her building. "I suppose designing viruses for the Plague War isn't the sort of thing you'd want to tell people about," she said.

"That's not the point," I told her. "That was only what he was *supposed* to be doing. He and his fellow conspirators kept their consciences clean by telling one another that their *real* work was entirely virtuous, and reveling in the paradox of having a noble cause that they could only serve by stealth in a deeply sick world. Go on—get your stuff."

She consented to be waved away.

While Carol-Anne was busy explaining to her parents—probably via the household Sloth—that she had been invited to the wake of the last living war criminal by his fresh-faced clone, I took the opportunity to call Mum. Even on the tiny dashboard screen her image seemed to radiate world-weariness.

"I got the message," I told her. "I'm on my way. I'm bringing Carol-Anne." I figured that it was safer to make the bald declaration. If I'd asked for permission, it might have started an argument. "How's Cade?"

"Better, actually," she said, sounding mildly surprised. In fact, there were perfectly good reasons why he should feel better now that his heavily cyborgized body had finally given up on him. The life-support machine had better oxygenators, a more powerful blood-pump and more sophisticated waste-disposal systems than any patched-up lungs, heart, and kidneys. The costs of their involvement would be subjective rather than objective; his hormonal orchestra would be strictly player-piano now, and he wouldn't have time to learn how to use a new pair of artificial hands. In theory, Cade's brain might be capable of remaining operational for another hundred years, but what he thought of as his *essential self* had crossed the last boundary. Everyone knew by now what happened to people who hung around too long; all sane people made contracts voluntarily disposing of their Last Rights.

"Is he going to try to see everybody?" I asked.

"As many as he can," Mum said, passing a hand across her brow with reflexive theatricality. "It's a matter of form. Some won't be able to come, of course, and some simply won't, but there'll be nearly two hundred. It'll be five or ten minutes each, and he'll need an earpiece to remind him who most of them are. He wants to make a speech to a full assembly, of course. I'm not at all sure it's wise, given that the newstapes are bound to rake up all that war criminal nonsense, but there's no way he'll consent to go quietly. He'll want a proper talk with you, of course. He'll probably save it up for the final evening, although he'll be utterly exhausted by then. I've already had *calls,* of course. Some say they're academic historians, but they're all newstape people really—all scum, Cade says, especially the ones who work for the government. It's going to be difficult. I can't remember the last flurry of scandal, of course, but . . ."

Mum was only a hundred and two. She was a second-generation product

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of the Repopulation, one of the vast majority of humankind for whom all other eras were items of bizarre history.

"Carol-Anne's coming back," I said. "We'll be there by eleven, probably. See you soon."

She didn't try to keep me on the line; she had plenty to do.

"Was that your Mum?" Carol-Anne said, as she threw her bag into the back. "Is she upset?"

"As upset as might be expected," I said, knowing that Carol-Anne hadn't the least notion of what might be expected. Mum had been living under Cade's roof for a long time, and it would be a major break in her life to have the obligation of his primary care removed. She would never find another burden remotely like it, no matter how hard she tried. Cade's death would release her, just as it would release me—and she must be just as frightened and confused by that prospect as I was.

I took the highway rather than the direct route. The highway ran through the valleys and didn't offer the same panoramic views as the Uplands A-road, but the sky hadn't brightened up and the thought of seeing all the jet black corrugated ap-layouts following the contours of the hillsides to the distant horizons wasn't appealing.

Cade hated ap-tech even more ferociously than those survivors of his own generation who harbored more general resentments against biological inventions. Artificial photosynthesis was far more efficient than Nature's chlorophyll-based technology, and its supportive apparatus was reportedly cleverer than the basic ACGT finger-exercises, but Cade loved *real life*. Ap-systems are black because they absorb and use all the solar energy that falls upon their surfaces, wasting nothing. Cade's refusal to admire that cut deeper than aesthetically superficial arguments about the joy of color; he was the only man I knew who could wax lyrical about the essential propriety of waste. "If PEST Control has its way," he was fond of saying, "the whole world will end up clothed in black: black oceans, black continents. It will be the funeral of the ecosphere. Everything Gaia ever did will be done by machine, with no hint of excess, nothing to *spare,* no margin for creativity. They're trying to cut out a whole section of the wheel of existence, simply because it seems to them to be *dirty* and *messy*. They call it hygiene but it's really a kind of neurosis. Anal retentiveness, Freud would have called it."

Cade was no Gaian mystic, of course, and certainly no Freudian, but he wasn't overly particular about the sources from which he borrowed his inspiration. I wasn't sure how far to go in agreeing with him about the evils of ap. I retained the usual Romantic regard for all the subtle variants of natural greenery, but I understood that human aesthetic sensibilities are only geared to color and growth because we haven't yet gotten around to retuning the relevant genes. I knew, too, that even the world's Alexander Chestertons wanted to preserve life, in all its myriad wild and domestic states. The real debate wasn't a matter of either/or—it was about striking the right *balance*. According to Cade, however, there was no myth so ridiculous and so pernicious as the myth of the *Balance of Nature*—not, at least, since we had contrived to rid ourselves of the myth of God. I usually sat on the fence when we talked about such matters, although he always said that I'd be better off playing Devil's Advocate. To accept that there had never been any balance in Nature was one thing; to infer that what we were

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

putting in nature's place ought not to embrace balance as a goal seemed to me to be a step beyond the bounds of logic, into the unknown.

The highway was flanked by embankments every bit as green as those dressing the western coast-road, and much steeper—but the greenery was just as carefully disciplined as the coast-road's single rank of bushes. Now that the dew had risen, I couldn't see spider-webs any more. The tiny predators were still there, growing fat on the liquidated flesh of even tinier plant-parasites, but from the vantage-point of the car I had to take that on trust. Everything I could actually see in the full glare of daylight was the product of elaborate landscape-gardening.

"What's an omnispore?" Carol-Anne asked, jutting her chin out to signify that she wouldn't be at all impressed by the suggestion that she should connect the car's Sloth to the Library and research the matter herself.

"It's a means of taking out insurance against the effects of a mass-extinction," I told her. "Opinions differ as to whether it's ever been one of Nature's ways. Cade first got interested in the idea because he thought that it would be the logical means for intelligent species to use in beginning the colonization of other worlds—what used to be called Terraformation. He still thinks that Earth's ecosphere may have been kick-started by a cargo of omnispores delivered by a space-probe, and he thinks that it might have been re-booted the same way, at least twice in the last few hundred million years. Way back before the Plague War, when Cade was just starting out on his career and rockets were carrying clever machines into space on a regular basis, he wanted to mount a search for spore-banks hidden in the asteroid-belt. He thought there might be hundreds of them there, each one waiting patiently for the chaotic effects of gravity to shift it into a collision course with Earth. No such dedicated mission was ever mounted, of course, but when Cade went to work for the Plague Warriors they sweetened the deal by offering him the chance to add a little extra programming to the Chaos Patrol."

"Chaos Patrol?" she queried.

"A ring of probes between Mars and the asteroids, set up to monitor the orbits of asteroids. The orbits are slightly unstable even at the best of times because of the immeasurably intricate play of gravitational forces exerted by the planets, and they become vulnerable to more profound disruption every time a big comet passes through. The Chaos Patrol was put in place as an early warning system designed to anticipate possible collisions with Earth. They're still out there. Cade has his own tracking system built into Napoleon—that's the family Silver—dutifully collecting the data that falls like the gentle rain from Heaven."

"Your family has its own Silver?"

"We didn't buy it—Cade built it bit by bit. Napoleon's a quirky beast, but we all love him, even Dad. I suspect that Cade's been waiting for centuries for him to make the leap to self-consciousness, the way Silvers were always supposed to do, but if he ever did he's had the sense to keep quiet about it. Various PEST Control hackers have been through his files looking for Cade's secret records, but they've never been certain whether their failure to find anything proves that there's nothing to find."

Carol-Anne was having trouble prioritizing all the questions that she wanted to ask. I could see that she was vaguely annoyed with me because I'd never seen fit to explain any of this before. My failure to mention Cade now seemed to her to be a major deception, whose magnitude and complex-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ity was just beginning to become apparent. It seemed to be a good idea to keep talking.

"The dinosaurs are everybody's favorite example of a mass-extinction," I rattled on, "but it wasn't just the dinosaurs. They were just the tip of the iceberg. The attrition rate was just as bad among the invertebrate phyla—the insects were devastated. Marine life fared better than land-based life and plants better than animals but relationships within an ecosphere are so complicated, and chains of influence so far-reaching, that the whole system collapsed, just as it did in the Spasm. Cade told me that the wave of extinctions really started some time before the famous asteroid hit, just as the Spasm really started long before the Plague War—but according to Cade, the real question wasn't so much *what did the killing?* as how did the *ecosphere recover so quickly?*

"That question must often have been on his mind while he and his colleagues sat inside that Swiss mountain making germs more virulent than any that natural selection had ever contrived. They made agents to blight crops and devastate stocks of domestic animals as well as people—and they engineered insect vectors to carry nasty bacteria and bacterial vectors to carry deadly viruses. Cade's paymasters didn't understand what had already been done to the ecosphere by two hundred years of heavy-duty pollution, and they probably didn't understand or care what their new campaigns were likely to do to the ailing ecosystems of which they were a part. The scientists, of course, saw things a little differently.

"What fascinated Cade wasn't so much the species that disappeared in the extinction-events of the remote past as the ones that didn't. The dinosaurs perished, except for a handful of species that turned into birds—but frogs came through. How? What frogs had, Cade says, was *genetic resilience.* A frog's egg has more DNA than a human's, because it has several distinct suites of genes that can carry out certain basic tasks in embryo-development. That means that a frog's eggs can develop in different ways, according to the environment in which the eggs find themselves. The frogs that were around in the early phases of the Spasm weren't very versatile, and Cade felt reasonably certain that they weren't going to make it this time—but that only convinced him that the alternative sets of genes that modern frogs had must be a vestigial relic of something much more complicated. And *that* made him wonder whether the highly specialized gene-sets of all modern species might be fragmentary relics of sets that were once much more complicated and much more versatile."

"Omnispores," said Carol, to prove that she was following the argument.

"Sort of," I agreed. "Once the Plague War began, Cade stopped worrying about whether he'd come up with a correct explanation of what happened in the past. The question of whether the original omnispores might still exist out in the asteroid belt, having been carefully sown by cosmic gardeners while the sun was young, seemed far less important than the possibility of building artificial omnispores that would get evolution kick-started again after the impending ecocatastrophe. And who better to figure that out, and get the production-line moving, than scientists working with the most sophisticated gene-splicing machinery that had ever been manufactured?

"That was the beginning of the Trojan Cockroach Plan. It wasn't just cockroaches, of course—but Cade figured that if the cockroaches didn't make it through the Spasm, nothing would. He used woodlice, beetles, flies, and spiders—but in every instance, the principle was the same. He im-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

planted packages of DNA into their reproductive organs: massive supplies of genes gathered from hundreds of different species, all locked into self-replicating megachromosomal structures he called superstrings. He fixed it so that the omnispores could hitch a ride in the eggs of the vector species, multiplying as their hosts multiplied—and he also fixed it so that they would be able to feed fragmentary packets of their own DNA into a tiny minority of the eggs, so that those eggs might hatch into something that wasn't a cockroach at all. The idea was that the cockroaches would carry the genes of hundreds of other species through the worst years of the Spasm, when virtually everything else died—and would then begin to make those genes available again, to kick start the evolutionary process and re-boot the whole ecosphere back to something like its former complexity within the space of a few hundred generations. That's roach generations, not human generations—thirty days or less.

"The passenger DNA was mostly taken from other insects and arachnids. *Forget what they say about poets, Carly,* Cade says. *The true legislators of the world are flies and mites. They make all the flowers grow and they mop up all the shit. Without flies and mites, the world would have gone straight to hell. They'll teach you in school that it was men who saved the ecosystem after the Spasm, but the so-called Noahs and their so-called Arks would have had a lot harder time of it if it hadn't been for my guys. Whenever they ask you who really saved the world, Carly, tell them that it was Mister Cockroach, with a little help from Mister Spider and Mister Fly.* He exaggerates, of course. The men from PEST Control think that the business of pollinating flowers is far better handled by careful gardeners armed with airbrushes, and that modern sewage-systems are as far ahead of maggots as ap-systems are of pondweed. Anything arthropods and DNA can do, humans and nanotech can supposedly do better: even evolution. Natural selection is messy and very wasteful by comparison with computer-aided design. That's in theory. In practice, PEST Control's computers can't figure out why so many new species are appearing with every year that passes. According to their models, Cade's omnispores should have run out of innovative steam a hundred years ago. Chaos should have shot its bolt, and Order should be well and truly enthroned as the Way of the World—but it isn't. Not yet."

"And the man who came to see you this morning wants to know the reason why?" said Carol-Anne.

"So he says. He might even be telling the truth. On the other hand, he might *want* me to think that all he's interested in is how to keep the roaches out of his precious ap-systems so that I'll meekly hand over Cade's secret files—whereas the thing he's *really* interested in is something *else* that's buried there."

"Like what?" said Carol, resentful of the implication that everything I'd been explaining so carefully might be little more than a smokescreen.

"Who knows? Maybe even *he* doesn't know. Maybe he just can't stand the thought that there *might* be something Cade's been holding back since the day the world went *splat!*"

"But he thinks that your clone-brother's dying gift to you will be a password that will let you into some hidden corner of the family Silver?"

"So it seems. I suppose I ought to hope that he's right, so that I can finally get the Dead Cat Squad off my back—but even if I give them whatever I get, they'll never be sure whether there might be something else even more interesting that I've managed to keep back. In a world of near-emortals,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

suspicions and obsessions can last forever. That's why Cade is the way he is."

We were just crossing the Forth, by way of the Replica Bridge. The busy grey waters of the river provided a sharp contrast to the sculpted slopes of the embankments, but the green corridor soon swallowed us up again. It wasn't until we approached the spangled towers of Kincardine that we would leave the highway for good. I felt a little guilty because when I'd got into the car I'd automatically taken the right-hand seat, so I'd have the river on my side while Carol-Anne would only have ap-farms on hers. Until we passed Crossford and emerged into the so-called wildland I'd be able to look out over the placid waves while she'd have the matte-black shadow looming up to her left. The interceptors were carefully shaped, of course, but they were so very accomplished at soaking up the light that it was almost impossible to make out the individual cones and fans. Sometimes, driving home along the Kincardine Road, I would stare intently at the black wall, searching for some hint of decay—some firm evidence that Cade's tiny protégés were making inroads into PEST Control's pride and joy. Unfortunately, black is a good color for concealment and if you stare at an ap-ribbon long enough you begin to feel that it's sucking you into oblivion. The side nearer the water was the better side to be, especially on a day like today, when the sky and the sea would be radiating more than their fair share of gloom.

I'd have liked it better if the wildland—however fake its wildness might be—had extended all the way from Crossford to Elba House, but it didn't. Kirkcaldy's population had doubled since I was born, and its supportive ap-farms had more than doubled their size in response. North of Burntisland the black ribbon reasserted its grip on the north side of the road, and only slackened it slightly as we skirted Kinghorn.

Mercifully, Elba House itself was set on a green headland to the northwest of the town, and the family land extended for at least a kilometer in every direction. The estate was wilder than wild—as wild, in fact, as the patient bureaucrats of PEST Control would allow. None of our neighbors appreciated the visitations they received from our mites, wasps, and centipedes, but they did like the butterflies and dragonflies, so their attempts to maintain a strict no-fly zone around the estate were always half-hearted. Elba wasn't an ecological island—but no island ever really is.

The traffic had decreased markedly in volume once we'd passed Kirkcaldy by, but I knew that the lonely road would soon be busy, by virtue of the extra traffic attracted by news of Cade's imminent demise. The clan was already gathering, and the gathering would drag in its fair share of hangers-on and parasites. News of the invocation of Cade's Last Rights hadn't yet been broadcast, but the information would be making its leisurely way through the Net, triggering responses in hundreds, or even thousands, of Sloths. Much that had long been forgotten was about to be remembered as countless soft triggers were pulled. The last war criminal in the world was about to be switched off, and millions of young people who had not yet discovered that there were such things as war criminals were about to get a cautionary dose of education.

As soon as I began to think about it, I realized that Cade's last address to the assembled family would undoubtedly be broadcast live, perhaps to an audience of millions. It would be taped for posterity too. It would be the only chance he had ever had actually to plead his case; despite the label applied

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to him, he'd never actually been tried in an open court. In the days when there had been enough hatred left to fuel a show-trial, there'd also been enough desperation left to let him get on with the serious business of saving the world. Now, if he took the opportunity, he would be able to set his defense before the world. The world would listen—but would it understand? Could anyone understand, after all this time, all that Cade had done, and why? Could anyone ever have understood, whether in the wartorn twenty-first century, the Spasm-devastated twenty-second, or the rapidly Repopulated twenty-third?

"It's beautiful," Carol-Anne said, as we drove through the estate—but she didn't mean it. She had been reared to find beauty in gardens, and showcase wilderness. To her, the family land looked scruffy.

"Beauty isn't everything," I told her—but that made her frown, because she took it entirely the wrong way. *She* was beautiful, and wanted that to be everything because she wasn't yet confident enough to think that she had much else to offer, especially now that she knew what a rare and exotic bird I was.

Mum came out to meet us before the car had slowed to a stop. Everybody else would have had to make their own way in, but I was special. She looked even more tired and fretful in the flesh than she had on screen. A hundred voices must have been clamoring for her attention since the small hours, and they weren't going to let up for a week. She couldn't expect Napoleon and his legion of Sloths to keep her safe. Sloths are no good at anything that can't be routinized and even Silvers, for all their superhuman cleverness, can't cope with the unprecedented any better than mere humans. As for the Big Uncles—nothing short of cosmic disaster could cope with *them* when they found an excuse to carp and criticize.

"I'm glad you're here, Carly," Mum said, as soon as she'd hugged me and said a dutiful hello to Carol-Anne. She meant that she hoped that I could take my full share of her burden. "He wants to see you now, but only for a few minutes. He says he has a million trivial things to do before he gets to the important stuff. It's all nonsense of course—there's nothing at all he *has* to do—but that's the way the formalities work. The others will feel slighted if they don't get their chance to say goodbye *properly*. It's going to be *so* difficult, Carly."

I kept my arm around my foster-mother's shoulder as we walked into the mazy corridors of the house, and she took what comfort she could from the gesture. Carol-Anne followed us, carrying her own bag. Although Carol-Anne had met Mum before it had always been at my place or in Glasgow; she'd never had the opportunity to see us in our native habitat. She looked around in every direction as we went upstairs, but when we got to my old room she fixed her eyes on Mum and me, as if seeing us properly framed for the first time. It wasn't until Mum had gone that Carol-Anne let her eyes travel studiously around the room, taking note of the bed, the curtains, the chairs and the desk.

"Is this really *you?*" she finally inquired, having contrasted its antiquity and dilapidation with the careful modernity of my apartment in Ayr.

"Not really," I said. "Everything here is Cade. He's been here so long he's seeped into the walls and the foundations, the dust and the soft furnishings. It's all reflective of the same genes, but it's not *me*."

"Who was the guy who gave you a filthy look?"

"Which one? The one on the stairs is Cousin Harry; the one who stuck his

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

head out of the room along the corridor is Uncle Jack. He's only a Little Uncle, though—Mum's generation. The Big Uncles will arrive trailing storm-clouds, especially the three Sons. Please don't expect me to recognize everyone who gives me a filthy look, or even the ones who are too polite. I can't even begin to sort out the various degrees of relatedness. Far better to take refuge in kiddy-speak and think of them all as uncles, aunts and cousins, little or big according to antiquity. They, of course, have no such trouble regarding me; every one of them knows *my* name and exactly how his or her position on the family tree relates to mine."

Carol-Anne nodded her head yet again, this time with genuine sympathy. The difficulty of keeping the generations of one's ancestors straight was something she did understand. People our age had by far the worst of it, of course, because the Repopulation had imposed such a powerful demand that the intermediate generations separating us from our several-times-great-grandparents should be fruitful and multiply, by whatever means that came to hand. We were more likely to be subject to the opposite kind of pressure. Our lives would be dominated by the question of how many people the world could and ought to contain, and the question of how to keep that number fixed once it was attained.

I left Carol-Anne to settle in while I went to see Cade. Mum had already moved half a dozen chairs into the corridor outside his room, anticipating the queues that were bound to form—but the vast majority of his descendants had to come from much further afield than Ayr. Uncle Jack had nipped in ahead of me, but as soon as the door-Sloth notified Cade that I was there Jack was summarily dismissed.

The mechanical cocoon that had taken over the burden of Cade's exhausted Internal Technology covered his entire body apart from his head, arms and shoulders. All its complexity was packed into the inner surface; from the outside it looked like a shiny plastic sack. No artificial limbs had been fitted to it to compensate for the nearly useless ones that rested on the bed. The tubes and leads connecting the cocoon to the house were neatly tucked away under the bed.

"So you finally decided to die, you old bastard," I said, with all the fake acidity I could muster. "About bloody time, isn't it?"

He laughed. The last time I'd seen him, he hadn't had breath enough to muster anything more than a hoarse cackle, but this was a full-throated laugh seemingly redolent with amusement. His face was flushed; the surge of new blood had broken numerous capillaries but it had also put some turgor back into his flesh, lightening the ruggedness of his wrinkles.

I went to pick up his right hand, intending to clasp it to my chest, but he shook his head slightly. I knew immediately what he meant and let the hand lie where it was.

"Somehow," Cade said, "it just doesn't feel as if it's mine any more. Where's Carol-Anne?"

I raised an eyebrow. I had assumed that he'd want to see me on my own.

"I want to look her over," he told me. "I can't die happy unless I know that you've got taste at least as good as mine, can I? Bring her along after the big show. We'll have a real talk, when the crap's run its course. Everything that needed settling is settled, but you have to go through the motions. Everybody that has a right to be seen has to be seen, every i that has to be dotted and t that has to be crossed. How are *you* feeling?"

"Grief-stricken," I told him, making the effort to sound sarcastic.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He laughed again. "You can't kid me," he said. "You're overjoyed at the thought of being the one and only."

"Sure," I said, dryly. "Overjoyed." I touched him lightly on the cheek, and suppressed a sudden tear. Until that moment, I'd managed to keep the extent and complexity of my feelings submerged, but I couldn't hide from him.

The panel beside the bedhead was already showing three amber lights: calls for his attention that dear old Napoleon had been forced to let through.

"Have to watch your back, Carly," Cade said, soberly. "PEST Control will be on to you, eager to rifle through anything and everything I give you."

"They already paid me a call," I told him. "They knew before I did—serves you right for losing your lungs while I was fast asleep."

He was startled by that, and slightly offended too. "The bastards," he murmured. "After all these years, the hate still lingers. I wish I could believe that there was more to their crusade than petty vindictiveness."

"Perhaps there is," I said. "I think they're genuinely worried about something. Bugs in the ap-systems, I think—*literal* bugs."

"The best kind. But there's nothing in that to disturb them—not really. Ap may not be DNA-based but it still produces the same old foodstuffs. *Of course* the roaches and the weevils are getting stuck in and having a ball. Always have, always will."

"You have a broader vision than they do," I pointed out. "They're obsessive about control, paranoid about anything they can't quite force into line. They really are worried about the rate of speciation, because it informs them that they aren't yet the emperors of the ecosphere—you're a court jester, murmuring reminders in their ear to the effect that their power isn't godlike."

"That's not it," he said. "They're bursting to know exactly what I did and how because they can't stand *not knowing*. They can't abide the thought that I've kept a secret from them all this time, and that I might be able to deliver it into your safekeeping without it passing through their sticky hands."

I smiled, probably unconvincingly. "We'll keep them guessing for a while yet," I said.

"You'll do a lot better than me, Carly," he said, signifying by his tone that he was no longer talking about PEST Control. "I'd already done a lot of dying before I was kitted out for longevity. With luck, you might live to be a thousand. But you won't have to go through all of this family gathering shit. Before you're much older, courtesy and the law will require people to postpone the business of reproduction until after they're dead."

"We're not quite there yet, Cade," I said. "They've only just authorized the repopulation of Tasmania. Now that Greenland's green again, there's a lot of empty territory in the far north—and the Continental Engineers are talking about raising a thousand new islands in Oceania. The Weather Control people are actually backing them, on the grounds that it will help them fine-tune Greenhouse Compensation."

"All crap," he said, predictably. "I wish I could be around to see it come unstuck. You'll have to say it for me, Carly. The day it all falls apart, I want you to be there to say: *Cade Maclaine told you so*. You'll do that for me, won't you?"

"Depend on it," I assured him. There were now ten amber lights demanding his response. He was pretending not to have noticed them, but I could see that he was getting fidgety—or would have been, if he'd had sufficient

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

control of his fingertips to fidget. Finally, he surrendered to the pressure of inevitability and looked at the bedscreen keyboard.

"After the big show," he said, "Everything will be blocked. *Everything*. We'll have as much peace and quiet then as we need, Carly. Bring Carol-Anne, so that I can take a good look at her—then we can take care of our own business."

"Sure," I said. "If there's anything you need . . ."

"Shit, Carly—I have everything I need and plenty more, except for time. No power on Earth can give me more of that. If I hadn't signed on the dotted line, I'd have rotted just the same. Best to go while I can still string a sentence together."

I nodded, to show that I understood. Then I kissed his forehead, aiming for the mind within the failing flesh.

"Thursday afternoon," he said. "As soon as the show's over."

"It's a date," I told him, as I moved toward the door. "Best of luck with the valedictory."

"Luck," he assured me, sardonically, "has absolutely nothing to do with it. If a man can't deliver an appropriately hypocritical suicide note, he's got no business dying at all."

I helped as much as I could with the logistics of the family gathering, but it wasn't the kind of task at which I excelled, and once the Sons began arriving they began to make a big song and dance about taking care of their responsibilities. The process of sorting out who was going to stay where, and how we were going to accommodate the audience for Cade's final address was simple enough—Napoleon had no difficulty at all in coming up with optimal distributions—but the real problem was dealing with the backlash of grumbles and complaints. No Son or Silver in the world had genius enough to calm the seething cauldron of real and imagined slights, or patrol the chaotic traffic in hypocritical condolences and inexpertly veiled insults. I didn't want my share of that—all the more so, given the resentment that my face generated. None of the Big Uncles really remembered what Cade had looked like when he was young, but they only had to look at me to convince themselves that they did, and to resent my imagined sacrilege.

There was, of course, a countervailing flow of honest condolences and polite conversations, sincere expressions of grief and genuine gestures of friendship, but pain never has the slightest difficulty eclipsing pleasure during a wake. No matter how hard you try, the bad things always demand more attention than the good, at least until the whole thing's over. Then the clever sieve of memory can get to work in filtering out the best and consigning the worst to oblivion.

Whenever I could get away, I got as far away as possible. While the weather lasted, I took Carol-Anne on long walks to show her the remotest corners of the estate. I proudly showed her all the local wildlife, no matter how ugly or insignificant. Unfortunately, I also made her stand idly by while I scanned the surfaces of the ap-systems beyond the southern border for tiny signs of dilapidation and infestation. I tried to make it up to her by taking her to the shore of the firth, but Greenhouse Compensation had moved the waterline so markedly during the last half-century that there was nothing at the margin of land and water but a slowly settling morass. It would be another hundred years before we got the beach back. We sat on

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a rock above the muddy shore and skimmed stones in the shallows of the firth. The water was still retreating to the second millennium levels presently considered to be optimal, but it hadn't far to go. The estate had just about reached the limit of its acreage.

Unfortunately, the rain, which held off on Saturday and Sunday, began to fall with grim determination on Monday, and didn't let up for thirty-six hours. Even if the weather hadn't made further outdoor excursions impossible, the local population pressure would have had the same effect. The number of aunts, uncles, and cousins taking turns around the perimeter to "get away from it all" would have increased to saturation point by Tuesday morning. The population density indoors was ten or twenty times as great, of course, but indoors has the advantage of being liberally equipped with walls. Indoors, you can always hide—and if you switch off the neighborhood Sloths, you can protect your privacy from everyone except discreet electronic eavesdroppers.

So hide we did. Sometimes, Carol-Anne and I took the opportunity to enjoy one another's close company, but we mostly did what everyone else was doing—including Cade, alongside his petty valedictory duties. We watched TV.

TV was the panacea that kept everybody's woes and worries at bay, because it offered us a delicately curved mirror in which all our private concerns were reflected and distorted. Now that he was dying, the world had briefly rediscovered Cade Carlyle Maclaine, and all his long-forgotten but never-forgiven sins were taken down from the shelf and dusted off for reconsideration. The exercise of his Last Rights became the hook on which to hang a orgy of remembrance; for a few dark days the Plague War was hot news, or at least hot history.

So far as I could tell from an admittedly patchy sample, four fifths of the TV coverage was about the Plague War and the Spasm, and four fifths of the remainder was about Cade's informal judgment and not-so-informal penance. Only a tiny fraction of the family-related TV time was devoted to his work on omnispores, and most of that was straightforwardly historical. Nothing was said about the possible contribution that Cade's omnispores might be making to the continuing emergence of new invertebrate species, let alone the hypothesis that there might be banks of natural omnispores waiting patiently in the asteroid-belt to re-boot the ecosphere if it were ever disrupted so severely that no human Arkwrights would be around to oversee the job.

Carol-Anne watched the Cade-inspired documentaries with as much fascination as I did, not because she was passionately interested in history's official verdict on the life and works of Cade Maclaine but because she wanted to be able to understand as fully as possible what my mysterious legacy might amount to.

"The omnispores that Cade Maclaine devised," one dutiful voice explained, in that curious purring tone that documentary voices always assume, "were awkward and unstable, even by the normal standards of natural biological material. There is an understandable temptation to think of omnispores simply as massive eggs crammed with the chromosomal packs of dozens of different species, but that analogy is misleading. Maclaine's DNA superstrings were much longer than the chromosomes of any existing species; they were chromosomal libraries of the genes possessed by what he deemed to be *archetype species*—species closest to the root stocks of whole genera or families.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"These superstrings were capable of reproducing themselves *in toto,* exactly as ordinary chromosomes do in mitosis, but they were also capable of fragmenting into thousands of randomly formulated subunits, any group of which could isolate itself from the protoplasmic mass within a nuclear membrane. These isolated sets of chromosomes would test their own viability as potential egg-cells by attempting to divide into two, then four and then eight associated cellules. Those which succeeded would then borrow oval surrounds from the reproductive apparatus of their host species—most famously, the American cockroach.

"The anomalous omnispore-carrying eggs would be laid by the host along with clutches of ordinary eggs; any organisms they produced would be capable of parthenogenetic reproduction as well as sexual reproduction, and the archetypal species thus regenerated would be ripe for rapid evolution and diversification in response to whatever conditions they might find and set forth to modify. . . ."

"It's too superficial," Carol-Anne complained, in disgust. "The explanations don't have sufficient depth or detail."

"It's still too complicated to hold its audience," I said, pointing to the indicator gauge, which had registered low to begin with and which was now descending into abyssal depths. "Anyone who really cares will use the Library. This junk is just to reassure the people who are watching the summary obituaries that they really don't want or need to know exactly what it was that Cade *ought* to be famous for. It's so much simpler to understand how he and his co-conspirators played along with the generals, making hardier strains of smallpox and AIDS and devising cleverer ways of distributing them to a target population while leaving everyone on the side of the angels untouched."

We watched the program to the end anyway, helping to keep a little light shining on the indicator gauge.

"How many calls from TV people have the Sloths intercepted now?" Carol-Anne asked—meaning calls to me rather than to the family entire.

"A couple of hundred," I said.

"Are you ever going to talk to any of them?"

"No. I've got a dozen Big Uncles who are only too happy to feed their appetite; they only want me because I'm the kid with Cade Maclaine's very own face. Once the switch is thrown it'll all die away—except, of course, for the Dead Cat Squad. *They'll* still want to keep track of me."

She went to consult the register of her own messages; requests from various journalists to talk to her were mounting up. I could see that she was tempted, but while I was keeping quiet she felt obliged to stay in step.

"Strange that they should be called Sloths when they're so hard-working," she observed.

"The name has nothing to do with the deadly sin," I said, unable to resist the temptation to show off my erudition. "In the early days, systems of that general kind were called AIs. In the beginning that stood for Artificial Intelligence, but when the first Silvers were developed it was necessary to make a distinction. Common parlance began to discriminate between Artificial Geniuses on the one hand and Artificial Idiots and Imbeciles on the other. Silvers got their nickname from the chemical symbol for silver, Ag, and the dictionary obligingly revealed to people who'd never before had occasion to look that ai was the Tupi name for the three-toed sloth. It started as a joke."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Your great-great-great-great-grandfather must be very proud of you, Carly," she observed, proving that there's many a true word spoken in jest.

"I had a lot of expectation to live up to," I told her, not jesting in the least.

Evening mealtimes were the hardest of all because protocol demanded that all those members of the family who still called Elba House "home" should actually gather together—except, of course, for those requiring non-portable life-support systems. My presence was obligatory, but Carol-Anne was in the invidious position of taking up a place at the fourteen-seater table that might otherwise have been available to a Big Uncle or Aunt. Everyone was terribly polite to her, but she sometimes felt—understandably—that she was under bombardment.

The conversation at dinner was invariably as boring and as stodgy as the food, and wine was not served. Nobody in the British Isles had contrived to shake off the dread legacy of the fact that it had been Stornoway, not Bordeaux, which had kept the flickering candle of civilization alight through the Spasm's generation-long Dark Age. Because their misappropriated names all began with "Mac," most of my older aunts and uncles thought that the new British Commonwealth really ought to be called the Scottish Empire.

Mum had by now been joined by my official foster-father, Stephen Harding Maclaine, who had always filled that position rather grudgingly, knowing full well that Cade was my *real* foster-father. Fortunately, the title carried with it certain responsibilities in respect of Mum, the house and me, so Dad was obliged to pull his weight both organizationally and conversationally.

As the main-course dishes were being cleared away on the evening before Cade's farewell address, my foster-father leaned toward me and said: "Carly, do you know a man called Chesterton? Alexander Chesterton?"

"We've met," I said.

"Same crew that keeps searching the house and grounds, I suppose?"

"The name of the Department changes periodically," I agreed, dolefully, "but the mission remains the same."

Dad nodded, philosophically. "Do you think they'll stop now?" he asked.

"With luck," I said, guardedly, having belatedly realized that he was trying to pump me.

"Nothing in it, I suppose? There isn't actually any secret to pass on, is there?"

I was suddenly aware that all the other dialogues-in-progress had lapsed, and that a profound and pregnant silence had descended. I realized, with a slight shock, that some of Cade's authority had already passed to me. It wasn't just that Dad expected me to know the answer; *everyone* expected me to know. The power was delicious; so was the temptation to dissemble.

"If there is," I said, judiciously, "you can rely on me to keep it in the family. We all owe Cade that much, don't we?"

For the first time, I realized that there is a unique joy to be found in filthy looks—but when I turned to Carol-Anne with a beaming smile, she didn't smile back.

"Has the old man told you what his big speech is going to be about?" Dad asked, trying to sound condescending.

"No," I said, "I think he wants it to be a surprise."

"Judging by the TV coverage," Dad pressed on, knowing that the eyes and ears of all the diners were still firmly fixed on the pair of us, "it would be a very wise move not to talk about the war. If he tries to justify what he did . . ."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"He's not a man to do the obvious thing," I said, reassuringly. "If he were, the world might still be a desert, and civilization might have been lost forever, even in Stornoway."

Mercifully, the weather brightened up considerably once the deluge had exhausted itself. I say "mercifully" because Cade wanted the family to gather outdoors to hear his final address. It would have to be relayed by video, of course, because his cocoon was immobile, but he had ordered a giant screen from Edinburgh that was to be erected beside the house, facing outward to the south-east. He wanted the family distributed in a great semi-circle with the headland and the firth at their backs, surrounded by the wildland—or, to be strictly accurate, the insects and spiders infesting the wildland. The world could watch from its myriad couches, surrounded by walls, but the family had to be knee-deep in Cade's pride and joy, however uncomfortable it became.

By the time his final address began he had seen everyone individually, if only for a matter of minutes, and the elaborate terms of his will had already been made public, but there are different kinds of farewell and different kinds of legacy. I heard half a hundred bitter complaints about being required to stand in a field, but I knew that no one had dared to stay indoors watching on TV. I was positioned between Mum and Carol-Anne, with an arm round each of them.

When Cade's face appeared on the screen I was surprised at how hollow it looked. His eyes seemed to have shrunk back into their orbits, and his cheeks had lost the pressurized bloom they had worn when I'd seen him in the flesh. He was obviously and conspicuously tired: a dying man putting on a show of dying.

It was, as he had promised, a big show—but it was not at all what I'd expected.

He began by thanking everyone for coming, keeping his voice low although there was no physiological necessity. He told them how pleased he was to have become the patriarch of such a vast and multi-talented family, and how proud he was of all their myriad accomplishments. He told them how enormously privileged he felt, all the more so because he had spent his formative years in a world in which large families were frowned upon, because of the strain they put on the ecosphere. He did not mention that the "strain" in question had precipitated the Spasm.

He claimed to be equally proud, pleased, and privileged because of the work he had been able to do in the aftermath of the ecocatastrophe that had all-but-destroyed the world. He made no mention whatsoever of the war that had preceded that catastrophe.

He was, he said, extremely glad that he had been able to play a part, however small, in the salvation of civilization from the direst threat it had ever faced. He made no mention of the fact that civilization had brought that disaster upon itself, and had failed to recognize that it was happening until it was far too late.

Because he had been a working biotechnologist during the Dark Age, he said, he was now able to think of himself as a foster-parent to *all* of the people of the new world, and to love them as much as he loved the members of his actual foster-family and all of *their* foster-children. He was able to take a delight in all their achievements, all their accomplishments, all their ambitions.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

And so it went on.

Although he had warned me, during our brief interview, I hadn't taken the warning seriously. I had never imagined that there might be so much hypocrisy in the old man, nor that he was capable of pouring out such an astonishing cataract of treacle.

He went on to talk about his hopes for the future of the world. He said that he had every faith in the ability of his foster-children, and their foster-children, and all the multitudes he thought of as his foster-children, to keep the new world safe—to make sure that the ecosphere would never suffer another Spasm. He complimented the ingenuity of the new generation of biotechnologists, who had devised such marvelous systems of artificial photosynthesis, and he complimented the ingenuity of Nature, which was generating new species at such a phenomenal rate. He apologized—actually *apologized*—for the special sentimental interest that he had always taken in insects and arachnids, and expressed the hope that the people of the future would be more appreciative of the wonderful work they did in sustaining the complexity of the ecosphere. There was no obvious *wit* in what he said, no contrived cleverness; it was all cliché, all banality.

I could not help but wonder whether he meant the insincerity of his words to be more obvious than it was. The people actually standing in the field on every side of me knew full well, of course, that he did not mean a word of it, but how could the millions watching him on TV have known it? Perhaps, I thought, he was taking it for granted that everything he said would be construed as sarcasm—and perhaps he was wrong to do so. No sooner had I thought that, however, than I was forced to wonder whether he might know perfectly well that the vast majority of those who were listening to him would simply take him at his word, not knowing enough about him to penetrate the levels of hidden meaning. Then again, I had to wonder how deep those layers of hidden meaning actually went. Did he intend the members of his immediate family—especially me—to be able to read between the lines of his speech in a way that others could not? Was he actually trying to say something to me and others like me that was not apparent on the surface—and, if so, what?

I could not tell. I could not, for the life of me, figure out why he was piling one sanctimonious vapidity on another, and another on top of that, instead of simply saying what he really thought . . .always assuming that I actually knew what he *really thought.*

So I stood, uncomprehending, as Cade Carlyle Maclaine senior told the people of the world what a privilege it had been to have lived so long among them, and how much he had enjoyed their company, and how glad he was to be able to say goodbye in this ordered and dignified fashion, and how much he loved life: *real life,* in all of its magical richness and strangeness and loveliness.

Toward the end, I found myself railing silently against him, saying: *Tell them about the Plague War! Tell them how you had to fight to save the world in secret, because you dared not let your masters know that you were not laboring full-time on ways of killing people! Tell them what it felt like to be hounded and harassed during and after the Spasm, always under threat of being charged as a war criminal but never actually granted the privilege of a trial at which you could have set your defense on record! Tell them how monstrously unjust it is that your greatest triumph—the technological miracle that repopulated the ecosphere so that the world of men could be repopulated*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in its wake—should have been derided and dismissed as the Trojan Cockroach Plan! Tell them that the vast new family of man is reaching the limit of its expansion, and that if it cannot find a broader and better consensus than the one that exists within the ranks of your foster-descendants then the next Plague War will be upon us soon enough, and the next Spasm too!

But he said none of that. It was sugar and spice and all things nice. It was nothing remotely like the Cade Maclaine I knew—the Cade Maclaine whose clone I was.

As his oration wound down, he addressed himself again to the people actually gathered in and around Elba House. He thanked us all for listening, and for coming to mourn his passing. He told us that he hoped with all his heart that we would be able to live happy and creative lives, no matter what challenges we would have to meet in the course of our long existence. He said goodbye, over and over again—and almost wept.

Almost, but not quite; of that hypocrisy, at least, he was incapable.

When the screen went blank, the crowd moved back toward the house, dispersing as it went. I moved with a better sense of purpose than anyone, dragging Carol-Anne behind me.

"All this must be very boring for you, Carol-Anne," Cade said, when we had taken up our positions by his bedside. "Family business is always tedious, always impenetrable to outsiders. I'm sorry. Carly should have brought you to see me before."

"It's all right," she replied, valiantly. "I wish I'd met you before, but I'm glad to have met you now." She'd obviously caught the mood of his valedictory speech.

"I'm glad too," he said. "Unfortunately, the family business isn't quite done. I'll have to ask you to leave us alone for a while."

"No problem," she said. She touched the old man's cheek before she left, and slightly increased the flush that sat upon it. Cade's eyes were no longer feverish, and his artificially assisted voice was strong and level as he bade her a fond farewell.

As soon as the door closed behind her the lights flickered, and the temporary silence became strangely profound.

"It's okay," Cade said. "Napoleon's closed everything down. He's killed the bugs the eavesdroppers planted, inside and out. We have privacy, at least for a little while."

"You're sure they're all out of commission?" I said, warily.

"Of course I'm sure. Chesterton's cronies may think they're professionals, but not one of them has ever employed or endured the kind of surveillance that was routine in Geneva. I know more about the business of keeping secrets than they'll ever learn, and they know it."

"Well, you certainly don't believe in letting people know what you really think," I said, trying to keep a tight rein on the resentment I couldn't help but feel, "and you certainly haven't lost the art of surprising your nearest and dearest."

"Don't be angry, Carly," he said. "I didn't give them the truth because they haven't *earned* the truth. I've always saved the truth for the people who were entitled to it."

"Your other self," I said, dryly. "They were right, weren't they? The Uncles, even that bastard Chesterton. You wouldn't trust your secrets to anyone but yourself—but because you had to die, you had go for the next best thing."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He looked at me sharply. "You don't sound too pleased about it," he observed.

I took a deep breath. "I'm not you, Cade," I said. "I may look like you—or like you used to look in your glorious heyday—but I'm not *you*. I haven't been formed by the kind of world that formed you. I don't have your paranoia. I'm not at all sure that I want to live the next few centuries the way you've lived the last few, guarding secrets and playing games—and I'm *very* sure that I never want to subject anyone to the kind of contempt that you've just poured all over your immediate family and everyone else who cared to listen. I've been a part of your game for a while now, and I won't say that it hasn't been fun, but I'm not sure that I can see any good reason for carrying on with it."

Cade looked up at me, with less hurt in his expression than I had feared to see.

"You're right," he said. "You weren't formed by the world that formed me. You didn't live through the war, desperately glad for the protection that came with being an expert designer of cunning weapons. They *were* cunning, Carly—not just because of the work that went into their design, but by their very nature. Plague War isn't like other kinds of war, you know—it's war by stealth, with betrayal built into it at every level. If you want to wipe out your declared and recognized enemies, you use bullets and nukes. Plague War is for your neighbors, for the people you want to wipe out without their ever suspecting that you want them dead. You didn't live through the Spasm, either, having lost all hope for humankind. You'll never know what it is to have nothing left to pray for but the possibility that the cockroaches might make it, and might carry the seeds of something better through the worst of the worst. Even *you,* Carly, can't even begin to imagine the experiences that shaped me—so don't you get pissy with me because I didn't try to explain it to the world at large."

That stung—but I could see a glimmer of justice in it, and he *was* dying.

"I'm not getting pissy with you," I lied. "I just don't know whether I can keep your precious secrets, if they even exist. I'm not sure that I can keep Chesterton and the Inquisition at bay, and I'm not sure that I even want to."

"Fair enough," he said. "But don't make up your mind until you know what they are—and they most certainly do exist. It wasn't just the habit of keeping my true feelings secret from anyone I didn't trust that I acquired in the bad old days. I also got the habit of keeping *very* meticulous records. I was *extremely* paranoid—but in those days, anyone who wasn't paranoid was off his fucking head. Do you really think that the world's changed? Do you really think that it doesn't make sense to be paranoid any more?"

"I think it's at least *possible* that PEST Control really are worried about problems of pest control," I admitted, uncomfortably. "I even think that the kind of control they want to exercise over the ecosphere isn't entirely a bad thing. I'm not your double, Cade. I don't want you handing me any secrets under the assumption that I'll look after them the way you have, for the same reasons. You have to understand that whatever you give me will become mine. I don't want to be permanently in trouble, Cade. I don't want Chesterton on my back for the next ten years, let alone the next hundred. I don't know how you've managed to hide your secret files for so long, and I admire the fact that you've been able to do it in spite of all the searches, but I'm not sure that I'll want to continue the game once I'm the only player on my side."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He didn't seem disappointed. In fact, he seemed ever so slightly *amused.* I realized that he must have anticipated the possibility that I'd react this way—and that he still thought that he had the last trump in his hand.

"Would you rather I didn't tell you?" he asked. "Would you rather leave now, and never know where I put the files?"

"It wouldn't do any good," I pointed out. "If Napoleon really has killed all the bugs, Chesterton will assume that I know even if I don't. If I really *don't* know, I'll *never* be able to get him off my back. If I do, at least I have the choice."

Cade knew that, of course. "You really haven't worked out where I put the files?" he said, challenging me one last time.

"No," I admitted, "I haven't. But I don't know how clever Napoleon really is, and I don't know the family estate like the back of my hand. There might be a hundred hidey-holes I couldn't know about."

He sighed, but time was getting short. "No place on Earth would be safe," he said. "I had to put the files where people couldn't get at them, even if they knew where to look. I uploaded them to the Chaos Patrol. Everything I ever wanted to hide is in orbit on the far side of Mars. You and Napoleon will have to work together to release it. No one else can do it without the full co-operation of both parties—unless, of course, they have some way of getting hold of the actual hardware. You can tell Chesterton that, if you want—but you might not want to."

"Why not?" I asked, knowing that there had to be a reason, even if it reeked of paranoia.

"Because he's a liar, like all of his kind. I'm sure he'd like to get hold of the omnispore records if he could, but concentrating his and your attention exclusively on them is a ploy. It's the other records he really wants to find."

"What *other records?*" I asked, although I thought I had it figured out.

"Don't be naïve, Carly. As I said, I got into the habit of keeping *very* meticulous records. When they closed Geneva down, the bosses got all the official records of the work we were supposed to be doing, but we were the people doing the work and we were just as anxious to cover our asses as our careful superiors were to cover theirs. The Chaos Patrol has all the documents the bosses didn't want to leave lying around for posterity, and it has all the documents the bosses didn't even know we had. Come on, Carly, did you *really* think that I was never prosecuted because the world was prepared to forgive and forget? I always knew *too much,* not just about the way the ecosphere was saved, but about the way it was damned in the first place. If you give Alexander Chesterton everything that's locked up safe and sound in the memory-banks of those satellites, you'd better pray that you won't have to be an innocent bystander in the next Plague War. I know more about security than he does, because I've had more practice—and I also know a hell of a lot more about the art, science, and downright dirtiness of plague warfare than he ever will. I've spent the last three hundred years trying to make sure that it stays that way."

"You could have wiped the files," I pointed out.

"So I could," he said. "But the real artistry of plague warfare is in the defense, not the attack. Anyone who has the data will be better equipped to launch a plague war because they'll be better equipped to make sure they survive it—but anyone who *hasn't* got the data is going to be left flat-footed if anyone else launches one. I'm paranoid, Carly—I never throw anything away, just in case the day comes when I need it. I don't want to hand it over

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to PEST Control, in case they start using it to clear out the wrong pests, but I don't want it destroyed, because there might come a day when the pests really do get out of hand. That includes flies and mites—but it's not the flies and mites that cause the worst problems."

"And you always thought that you were the only one capable of making that decision?" I said, knowing that he very probably did. "You've always thought that you're the only one who could be trusted with the responsibility—except, of course, for your faithful clone-brother."

"I had it," Cade said, stubbornly. "Nobody else did, once my co-workers had been swept away. I never felt like giving it to anyone else, but as you pointed out, I can't hang on to it forever. It's you or them, Carly, and I prefer you. Once I give you the codes, it'll be your decision, your responsibility. You can give it away if you want to, or you can keep it. You're not me, because you haven't grown up in a paranoid world—but what you have to ask yourself, Carly, is what kind of a world you're going to be living in when you get older, and older, and older. Just how confident are you of the new order, the black world? You can get Alexander Chesterton off your back, if you want to, for ten or a hundred years—but what you have to ask yourself is whether *anything* you do can keep people like him off your back forever, and whether they're the kind of people who can be trusted to run the world for the next *thousand* years. If you're even a little bit like me, and I think you are, you'll decide that there's no rush—that maybe you'll come clean tomorrow, or the next day, but for now you'll hang on to what you've got, just in case."

I looked down at him, remembering that he probably knew certain aspects of me better than I knew myself.

Finally, I said: "Are you *sure* that Napoleon has killed all the bugs?"

"Oh yes," he said. "Of that, I'm sure. He's not really a he, of course. He's just a machine—but you and he will be able to have a lot of fun together, when you get to know one another a little bit better. He's very good at games."

Carol-Anne and I hadn't been back at my apartment for half an hour before Alexander Chesterton turned up, cramming the inevitable warrant into the Sloth's slack mouth. This time, Carol-Anne wasn't content to eavesdrop; she stayed in the room while the government man took up his position in the guest armchair, eyeing the pair of us speculatively.

"Don't tell me," I said. "You need to talk to me about the terms of Cade Maclaine's will, and the substance of my inheritance."

"We've seen the will," he said, dismissively. "What we need to talk to you about is what passed between you and Cade Maclaine senior in the hour immediately preceding his death. I'll have to ask for your affirmation, of course."

For once, as I promised to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, I wasn't able to take refuge in the fact that I could do exactly as promised and not give anything away.

"Cade Carlyle Maclaine junior," Chesterton said, sonorously. "Have you, since you last gave testimony, received from Cade Carlyle Maclaine senior any information related to the researches that Cade Carlyle Maclaine senior carried out in and around the city of Geneva between 2034 and 2074?"

"Yes," I said.

"Do you know where any records of that research are kept?"

"I know where certain records *were* kept," I admitted.

"Where were they kept?" Chesterton was looking at me with keen inter-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

est, avid to find out what my next move would be, but my scrupulously pedantic shift of tense had brought a slight frown to his face.

"They were uploaded by Cade Maclaine into the guidance computers installed in a ring of artificial satellites set up in the twenty-first century to track comets and monitor fluctuations in the orbits of asteroids."

I was glad that I'd told him, because it would have been a pity to have missed the expression of shock and slight disgust that crossed his face. Like me, he hadn't been able to guess, and like me he'd immediately started kicking himself because he figured that he *ought* to have guessed. He had to pause for a moment or two in order to formulate the next question.

"Do you know the codes that would give an earthbound observer access to those records?" he asked.

"No," I said.

"I suggest that you think very carefully about that answer, Mr. Maclaine," he said.

"I have," I assured him, truthfully. "And I suggest that you think very carefully, too, about the question. To the best of my knowledge and belief, there are no longer any such codes—because, to the best of my knowledge and belief, the records in question no longer exist."

"And what reason do you have to think so?" he asked, sharply.

"Because, with the assistance of the Silver at Elba House and with Cade Maclaine senior's consent, some fifteen minutes before Cade's life was terminated, I transmitted an instruction to the satellite-computers that shredded all the records he had placed there. There's nothing left in the repositories but random numbers."

That brought Alexander Chesterton bounding out of his seat.

"You did *what?*" he demanded.

"I believe," I said, coldly, "that I have already answered that question." I looked at Carol-Anne, who was regarding me with as much amazement as the civil servant—but her eyes were already clouded with doubt, because she couldn't quite believe that it was true. Chesterton had to wait until his alarm had faded before it could be replaced with a similar skepticism.

"Are you aware," he said, when he had recovered his composure, "that if what you say is true you then have committed an offense under the terms of Act. . . ."

"No," I said, not waiting to hear which Act I had allegedly violated. "To the best of my knowledge and belief, those records were private, relating entirely to research that Cade Maclaine carried out on his own initiative, and to which no present government has any justifiable claim. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the records were also irrelevant to any contemporary concerns, given that the omnispores whose design was catalogued therein no longer exist."

"You were warned . . ." Chesterton began.

I cut him off again. "I heard the warning, Mr. Chesterton. If you want to charge me, charge me. Then we can discuss in open court the exact nature and extent of the information you've been trying to recover, and your probable motives for attempting to recover it. I shall be perfectly happy to explain my reasons for destroying the information, and to have those reasons placed on the official record."

"Maclaine would never have let you do it," he said, not bothering to formulate the judgment as a question.

"He needed his secrets to keep him alive and interested," I retorted. "I don't.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I don't have his frailties, or his history. I'm not him. He understood that. He *always* understood it. He gave me the option, but when I made my decision, he was perfectly happy to carry his secrets to the grave, where they belong."

"You're lying," he said.

"It's the truth," I assured him. "It's the *whole* truth, and nothing but the truth. If you don't believe me, you can interrogate the satellite computers—and if and when you revive the space program, and send someone who can check the hardware, you'll have the final proof. I fully intend to be around when that day comes, so I certainly wouldn't take the risk of lying about it. I'd like you to leave now, if you don't mind. The founder of my family is dead, as is my one and only clone-brother. I'm still trying to come to terms with that. I don't think we have anything further to say to one another—now or ever."

For a moment, I thought that he might sit down again, out of sheer stubbornness, but he didn't. After a moment's hesitation, he nodded his head. As he left, though, he took care to say: "This isn't the end of the matter, Mr. Maclaine. We *will* check the satellite computers—and we'll certainly keep a very close watch on any traffic between the satellites and the Elba House Silver. If you ever attempt to access those files. . . ."

"There are no files," I told him. "Not any more."

He didn't believe me. Nor would his superiors.

I sat down, but Carol-Anne remained standing. We'd been in the car for over two hours, and she had become used to the fact that there was no point in asking questions that caution and pragmatism forbade me to answer. She had to use her eyes to say the words that she couldn't speak.

Are you lying? her eyes asked. *Are you taking up where Cade left off, ready to play the game forever?*

"I'm starving," I said, as affably as I could. "It's a bit late, but shall we get something to eat?"

I knew then that she would never be able to take my word for it. She would never be able to rest content with the notion that I had done what I said I had done. She would never be able to accept that although I was Cade's clone, I wasn't his shadow, his heir, his second self. It was one thing for Alexander Chesterton to take that view, because he was professionally obliged to, but Carol-Anne was different. I wondered whether I ought to like her less or more because she couldn't take my word for what I said. It wasn't a failure of trust. In a way, it was a special kind of trust—a trust that took it for granted that I would never yield to external pressure, and that I would always find a way of staying one step ahead of any game I decided to play.

I suddenly realized that I could change my name now, if I wanted to. Now that I was the one and only, I could be Cade *or* Carly—or maybe even both.

"Are you really that hungry?" she asked, lightly. Alexander Chesterton could never have contrived such a deft question.

"Yes," I said. "I wasn't earlier, but I am now. It's been a long, hard day at the end of a long, hard week, and I've really built up an appetite."

"In that case," she said, "I'll see if the cockroaches have left you anything that's fit to eat."

"Don't disparage the cockroaches," I told her. "They may not look like much, but their great-great-great-great grandparents were hosts to multitudes. Even now, there may be a few left who have hidden agendas."

"Even now," she agreed, in a manner that suggested that she really had been glad to have had the opportunity to meet Cade Carlyle Maclaine before he said goodbye. O

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

MATHEMATICAL LIMERICKS

TEN TO THE HUNDREDTH, ETC.

A googol decided to engage in sex,
While all of its aughts were still convex.
Like any number on the sly,
It never meant to multiply,
But look out now for googolplex!

REDUCTIO AD ABSURDUM

There was a young man named Levine,
A challenge he could not decline.
With straightedge and knife,
He spent his whole life,
Dissecting the points in a line.

FTL-NESS

When traveling at light speed to Sirius,
The hours can grow quite mysterious.
The clock's ovoid face
Makes numbers erase,
Newtonian physics delirious.

DEDUCTION BY INFERENCE

A mathematician named Gödel,
Posed for his fellows a hurdle,
No abstract existence
Can prove its consistence.
The tail wags the shell, not the turtle.

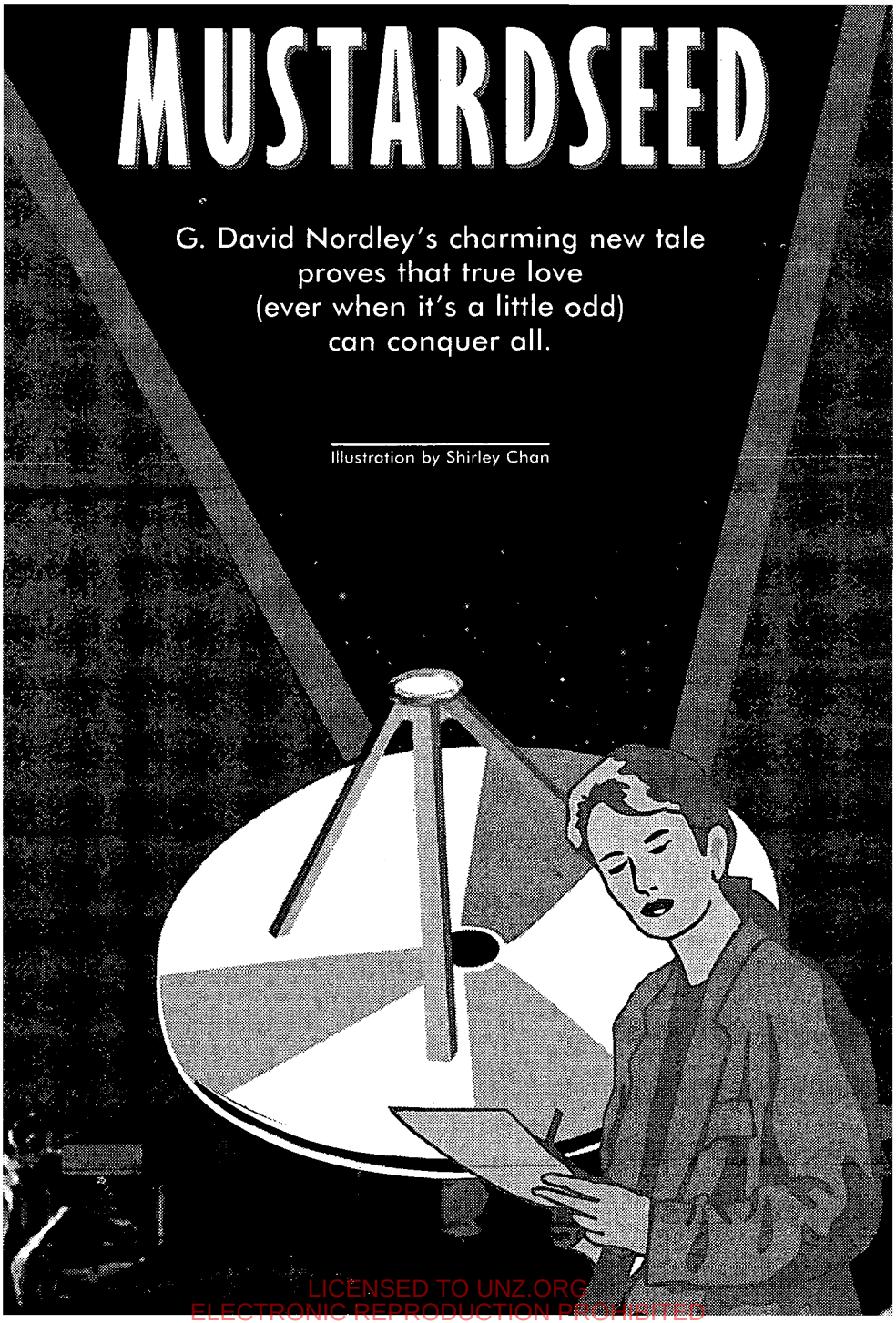
—Bruce Boston

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

MUSTARDSEED

G. David Nordley's charming new tale proves that true love (ever when it's a little odd) can conquer all.

Illustration by Shirley Chan



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Human beings called me Mustardseed. As satellites of Uranus go, I wasn't much—barely three kilometers in radius compared to Titania's five hundred or so. I wasn't even in the same plane as Uranus' other moons—I sat way out here in the plane of the ecliptic, watching the rest of them roll around the solar system with their poles where the equators of proper planets belong. Not that I was much of a solar system conformist either; oh, no, I orbited Uranus the wrong way around with my angular momentum vector bass ackward. The rock different, that was me. Why, it's almost as if I had a mind of my own even back when the solar system was formed!

But that came along some four and a half billion years later, about thirty million years ago—only yesterday as the stars reckon things.

It took human beings long enough to notice me. Well, I'll excuse the first thirty million years or so because they weren't really human beings. But you would have thought that by the time their probes went whizzing by here like bullets from inner solar system hell and they'd built telescopes on their own overstuffed moon that were nearly as wide across as I was, *someone* would have noticed.

But no. By the time a star survey computer cataloged my smudgy few bits on their precious files (so as to not be bothered by me later), humans had colonies on Mars and were getting big ideas about polluting Venus. A twenty-year-old astronomy student named Jane Pitt, looking through the data for something much more interesting, finally noticed that, far out as I was, I was orbiting Uranus instead of just drifting around out there and pulled out her Shakespeare. After a year in committee or so, I got the name of some minor fairy. I love it. I love Jane for giving it to me. I kind-of think of her as my mom.

By that time, I'd absorbed enough electromagnetic noise from that metastasizing infestation of the third planet to not only learn their audio and digital languages but even develop a facility with the lingo and a bit of an attitude as well. Granted, my presence was intended to be part of a good-natured game of hide and seek, but, Chaos, these folks were dense!

But not as dense as the dark thing I found heading our way in 2038. Big D, I called it. How did I see it? I've got doped silicon eyes all over me and they get every photon that hits 'em. Just think of me as a three-kilometer-wide light bucket. Starlight was enough.

It passed in front of Aldebaran, and from its neutrino shadow I found it was solid iron, iridium, and such—probably the core of what was once a terrestrial planet whose parent star suffered a close encounter of the most disruptive kind. Now, like supernovae, that's rare: it happens once in a galaxy in a century or so.

How long was it drifting around up there? No way to tell without landing on it and taking a sample, but I can say this much; big D was hyperbolic with respect to this Galaxy's mass, which means it's been out there a long time and it was truckin'.

Anyway, it took me a year or so to get an orbit I believed, mostly because I didn't want to believe it. But there was no sense in denying things; it was going straight for Earth and Jane. On Earth, they say abused children have a tendency to be abusers themselves, in time. What a human mind I've developed, to salve disaster with irony!

Chaos! What a mess! I was under strict orders from the Makers not to initiate contact; humans had to find me first, and my present position was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

carefully arranged so they wouldn't do so until they'd had the fun of conquering their own planetary system, but *before* they started bothering anyone *else's*. Moreover, I wasn't even to interfere surreptitiously. "Let nature take its course" was the wisdom of eons; and my sometimes favorite Earth authors said, "Consider it evolution in action."

But there have to be exceptions, right? I mean, it just isn't fair to blow Jane away with something as improbable as this. I went through a reflexive logic moment, which artificial intelligences do when they have trades to make. You see, I've got to act as human as I can so that when they find me, I'll get along just fine with them. On the other hand, I've got to do what I was *built* to do.

The Makers were kind of dried-up unsentimental beings, billions of years removed from their biological origins. That's a God-awful lot of been-there-done-that. Among the many things they know is that beings like me need to learn to be a little closer to my soon-to-be students to guide them on the true path of galactic responsibility.

So I was built to understand love, but not to *do* it. Or was I? Maybe my independent mind was made that way so I could reprogram a bit and handle contingencies like Big D? I tried to gear up my transmitter and a dozen subroutines that I was only dimly aware of kicked in. Bad Idea. Leave them alone. Don't interfere. Evolution in action. Responsibility.

I followed Jane's life. She got a husband and a baby, Cindy, instead of a Ph.D. Then a divorce. She went back to school at thirty-five years of age and finally got her degree and a position at age fifty. She was portly now, and I knew the standards of beauty, but love alters not when it alteration finds. Anyway, by that time, I'd downloaded the whole human genome and knew just how to make her young forever.

Don't interfere. Evolution in action. Responsibility.

Big D coming. Not *her* fault.

I started working on a hypothetical scenario—hypothetical, understand that? I am not interfering; I'm thinking about interfering, which is something else entirely, and if they don't know I'm interfering, what's the problem? Okay? Got it?

Since I could continue to think about it, maybe those subroutines didn't think it was a problem. Got to be real careful, though.

Now Big D was zooming in and there I was, way out from Uranus and with hardly any orbital velocity at all; touch me with a feather (well, an errant kuiperoid) and I'd fall. Now let's just suppose that way down there near the cloud-tops of Uranus, I got a little push and ended up with some hyperbolic excess velocity in just the right direction.

Hey, with hyperbolic excess velocity, I could escape Uranus and run smack into Big D! Yes, the whole thing was super-unlikely, but all anyone on Earth would know was that some big interloper had run into a piece of outer solar system debris. If they were really good, they might figure out that before the collision, the interloper was gonna hit them, and feel like they'd dodged a bullet.

Maybe, years later, they'd notice that a minor fellow traveler of Uranus was missing. But connect the two? No way! Mustardseed would be gone, but Jane and Cindy, who knew him not, would yet survive for his love.

My subroutines didn't like this too much. Unfair, I told them. Improbability balances improbability and restores symmetry to the development of universal destiny.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

During this argument, I start to accumulate lots of deuterium from my icy layers.

I settled the argument by blowing my top and falling down toward Uranus: a puff of gas some machine would see, and years from now someone will speculate that Mustardseed was really a comet.

Months later, hidden by the bulk of the dark green giant, I shed much more mass and headed to my destiny.

I left some of me behind, down there in the radiation close to Uranus. I still had a mission, so certain parts of me fell on a nameless ring-shepherd moon, devoured part of that satellite, and, for all functional purposes, became pretty much what I was supposed to be.

This part saw Mustardseed annihilated on the surface of Big D with the force of billions of billions of those puny things humans call nuclear bombs. Big D shrugged it off easily, scarcely moved by the event.

But scarcely was enough. It will miss Earth by a week now.

The watcher goes on, but it will never be the same. It is nameless now. The special relationship with Jane is history—gone, alas, gone, with poor lost Mustardseed. The bard was wrong, a rose by any other name, or nameless, is not the same. It sacrificed its identity and sacred name, and so, logically, was cleansed of love. It shall be far more objective in the future. The self-watching subroutine loops are still.

But hark! What spacecraft doth approach? Is it captained by Cindy? Is she naming moonlets? Oh, pray that this be so and that so the sweet breath of love shall wake this soul once again! ❍

ARE YOU MOVING ?

If you want your subscription to ASIMOV'S to keep up with you, send both your old address and your new one (and the zip codes for both, please!) to our subscription department:

ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION

P.O. Box 54033,
Boulder, CO 80322-4033

or fill out the change-of-address form on our website:

www.asimovs.com

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Eleanor Arnason

DAPPLE

A *Hwarhath* Historical Romance

Eleanor Arnason's first story for us, "The Lovers" (July 1994), was set on a planet with a culture deeply alien to our own. She returns to this captivating world to tell another tale about these remarkably complex people.

Illustration by Steve Cavallo

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

There was a girl named Helwar Ahl. Her family lived on an island north and east of the Second Continent, which was known in those days as the Great Southern Continent. (Now, of course, we know that an even larger expanse of land lies farther south, touching the pole. In Ahl's time, however, no one knew about this land except its inhabitants.)

A polar current ran up the continent's east coast and curled around Helwar Island, so its climate was cool and rainy. Thick forests covered the mountains. The Helwar built ships from the wood. They were famous shipwrights, prosperous enough to have a good-sized harbor town.

Ahl grew up in this town. Her home was the kind of great house typical of the region: a series of two-story buildings linked together. The outer walls were mostly blank. Inside were courtyards, balconies, and large windows provided with the modern wonder, glass. Granted, the panes were small and flawed. But some ingenious artificer had found a way to fit many panes together, using strips of lead. Now the women of the house had light, even in the coldest weather.

As a child, Ahl played with her cousins in the courtyards and common rooms, all of them naked except for their fog-grey fur. Later, in a kilt, she ran in the town streets and visited the harbor. Her favorite uncle was a fisherman, who went out in morning darkness, before most people woke. In the late afternoon, he returned. If he'd been lucky, he tied up and cleaned his catch, while Ahl sat watching on the dock.

"I want to be a fisherman," she said one day.

"You can't, darling. Fishing is men's work."

"Why?"

He was busy gutting fish. He stopped for a moment, frowning, a bloody knife still in his hand. "Look at this situation! Do you want to stand like me, knee deep in dead fish? It's hard, nasty work and can be dangerous. The things that women do well—negotiation, for example, and the forming of alhances—are no use at all, when dealing with fish. What's needed here," he waved the knife, "is violence. Also, it helps if you can piss off the side of a boat."

For a while after that Ahl worked at aiming her urine. She could do it, if she spread her legs and tilted her pelvis in just the right fashion. But would she be able to manage on a pitching boat? Or in a wind? In addition, there was the problem of violence. Did she really want to be a killer of many small animals?

One of the courtyards in her house had a basin, which held ornamental fish. Ahl caught one and cut off its head. A senior female cousin caught her before she was finished, though the fish was past help.

"What are you doing?" the matron asked.

Ahl explained.

"These are fish to feed, not fish to eat," her cousin said and demonstrated this by throwing a graincake into the basin.

Fish surged to the surface in a swirl of red fins, green backs, and blue-green tails. A moment later, the cake was gone. The fish returned to their usual behavior: a slow swimming back and forth.

"It's hardly fair to kill something this tame—in your own house, too. Guests should be treated with respect. In addition, these fish have an uninteresting flavor and are full of tiny bones. If you ate one, it would be like eating a cloth full of needles."

Ahl lost interest in fishing after that. Her uncle was right about killing. It

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

was a nasty activity. All that quickness and grace, gone in a moment. The bright colors faded. She was left with nothing except a feeling of disgust.

Maybe she'd be a weaver, like her mother Leweli. Or the captain of a far-traveling ocean-trader, like her aunt Ki. Then she could bring treasures home: transparent glass, soft and durable lead.

When she was ten, she saw her first play. She knew the actors, of course. They were old friends of her family and came to Helwar often, usually staying in Ahl's house. The older one—Perig—was quiet and friendly, always courteous to the household children, but not a favorite with them. The favorite was Cholkwa, who juggled and pulled candy out of ears. He knew lots of funny stories, mostly about animals such as the *tli*, a famous trouble-maker and trickster. According to the house's adults, he was a comedian, who performed in plays too rude for children to see. Perig acted in hero plays, though it was hard to imagine him as a hero. The two men were lovers, but didn't usually work together. This was due to the difference in their styles and to their habit of quarreling. They had, the women of Ahl's house said, a difficult relationship.

This time they came together, and Perig brought his company. They put on a play in the main square, both of them acting, though Cholkwa almost never did dark work.

The play was about two lovers—both of them warriors—whose families quarreled. How could they turn against one another? How could they refuse their relatives' pleas for help? Each was the best warrior in his family.

Though she hadn't seen a play before, Ahl knew how this was going to end. The two men met in battle. It was more like a dance than anything else, both of them splendidly costumed and moving with slow reluctant grace. Finally, after several speeches, Perig tricked Cholkwa into striking. The blow was fatal. Perig went down in a gold and scarlet heap. Casting his sword away, Cholkwa knelt beside him. A minor player in drab armor crept up and killed Cholkwa as he mourned.

Ahl was transfixed, though also puzzled. "Wasn't there any way out?" she asked the actors later, when they were back in her house, drinking *halin* and listening to her family's compliments.

"In a comedy, yes," said Cholkwa. "Which is why I do bright plays. But Perig likes plays that end with everyone dead, and always over some ethical problem that's hardly ever encountered in real life."

The older man was lying on a bench, holding his *halin* cup on his chest. He glanced at Cholkwa briefly, then looked back at the ceiling. "Is what you do more true to reality? Rude plays about animals? I'd rather be a hero in red and gold armor than a man in a *tli* costume."

"I'd rather be a clever *tli* than someone who kills his lover."

"What else could they do?" asked Perig, referring to the characters in the play.

"Run off," said Cholkwa. "Become actors. Leave their stupid relatives to fight their stupid war unaided."

It was one of those adult conversations where everything really important was left unspoken. Ahl could tell that. Bored, she said, "I'd like to be an actor."

They both looked at her.

"You can't," said Perig.

This sounded familiar. "Why not?"

"In part, it's custom," Cholkwa said. "But there's at least one good reason.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Actors travel and live among unkin; and often the places we visit are not safe. I go south a lot. The people there love comedy, but in every other way they're louts and savages. At times I've wondered if I'd make it back alive, or would someone have to bring my ashes in an urn to Perig?"

"Better to stay here," said Perig. "Or travel the way your aunt Ki does, in a ship full of relatives."

No point in arguing. When adults started to give advice, they were never reasonable. But the play stayed with her. She imagined stories about people in fine clothing, faced with impossible choices; and she acted them out, going so far as to make a wooden sword, which she kept hidden in a hayloft. Her female relatives had an entire kitchen full of knives and cleavers and axes, all sharp and dangerous. But the noise they would have made, if they'd seen her weapon!

Sometimes she was male and a warrior. At other times, she was a sailor like Ki, fighting the kinds of monsters found at the edges of maps. Surely, Ahl thought, it was permissible for women to use swords when attacked by monsters, rising out of the water with fangs that dripped poison and long curving claws?

Below her in the barn, her family's *tsina* ate and excreted. Their animal aroma rose to her, combining with the scent of hay. Later she said this was the scent of drama: dry, aging hay and new-dropped excrement.

The next year Cholkwa came alone and brought his company. They did a decent comedy, suitable for children, about a noble *sul* who was tricked and humiliated by a *tli*. The trickster was exposed at the play's end. The *sul*'s honor was restored. The good animals did a dance of triumph, while the *tli* cowered and begged.

Cholkwa was the *tli*. Strange that a man so handsome and friendly could portray a sly coward.

Ahl asked about this. Cholkwa said, "I can't talk about other men, but I have that kind of person inside me: a cheat and liar, who would like to run away from everything. I don't run, of course. Perig would disapprove, and I'd rather be admired than despised."

"But you played a hero last year."

"That was more difficult. Perig understands nobility, and I studied with him a long time. I do as he tells me. Most people are tricked and think I know what I'm doing. But that person—the hero—doesn't speak in my mind."

Ahl moved forward to the play's other problem. "The *sul* was noble, but a fool. The *tli* was clever and funny, but immoral. There was no one in the play I could really like."

Cholkwa gave her a considering gaze, which was permissible, since she was still a child. Would she like it, when men like Cholkwa—unkin, but old friends—had to glance away? "Most people, even adults, wouldn't have seen that. It has two causes. I wrote the *sul*'s lines, and, as I've told you, I don't understand nobility. The other problem is my second actor. He isn't good enough. If Perig had been here, he would have made the *sul* likable—in part by rewriting the lines, but mostly because he could play a stone and make it seem likable."

Ahl thought about this idea. An image came to her: Perig in a grey robe, sitting quietly on a stage, his face unmasked and grey, looking calm and friendly. A likable rock. It could be done. Why bother? In spite of her question, the image remained, somehow comforting.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Several days later, Cholkwa did a play for adults. This event took place at night in the town hall, which was used for meetings and ceremonies, also to store trade goods in transit. This time the back half was full of cloth, big bales that smelled of fresh dye, southern blue and the famous Sorg red.

Ahl snuck out of her house after dark and went in a back door, which she'd unlocked earlier. Climbing atop the bales, she settled to watch the play.

Most of it was past her understanding, though the audience gasped, groaned, clapped, and made hissing noises. Clearly, they knew what was going on.

The costumes were ugly, in her opinion; the animals had huge sexual parts and grimacing faces. They hit each other with padded swords and clubs, tumbled and tossed each other, spoke lines that were—as far as she could tell—full of insults, some sly and others so obvious that even she made sense of them. This time the *sul* was an arrogant braggart with a long narrow head and a penis of almost equal size and shape. The *tli*, much less well endowed, was clever and funny, a coward because he had to be. Most of his companions were large, dangerous, and unjust.

It was the *tli's* play. Mocking and tricking, he won over all the rest, ending with the *sul*'s precious ancestral sword, which he carried off in triumph to his mother, a venerable female *tli*, while the *sul* howled in grief.

The Sword Recovered or The Revenge of the Tli. That was the name of the play. There was something in back of it, which Ahl could not figure out. Somehow the *sul* had harmed the *tli's* family in the past. Maybe the harm had been sexual, though this didn't seem likely. *Sulin* and *tli* did not interbreed. Puzzled, she climbed down from the bales and went home. The night was foggy, and she almost lost her way in streets she'd known her entire life.

She couldn't ask Cholkwa to explain. He would have told her relatives that she'd seen the play.

After this, she added comedy to her repertoire, mixing it with the stories about heroes and women like her aunt, far-travelers who did *not* have to die over some kind of unusual ethical dilemma.

The result was a long, acted-out epic tale about a hero, a woman sailor, a clever *tli,* and a magical stone that accompanied the other three on their journey. The hero was noble, the sailor resourceful, and the *tli* funny, while the stone remained calm and friendly, no matter what was going on. There wasn't any sex. Ahl was too young, and the adult comedy had disgusted her. It's often a bad idea to see things that are forbidden, especially if one is young.

In the end, one of her cousins—a sneak worse than Cholkwa in the children's play—found out what she was doing and told her senior female relatives. "Clearly you have too much free time," they said, and assigned her work in the house's big weaving room. The sword was destroyed, along with the bits of armor she'd made. But her relatives decided the *tli* mask, constructed of bark paper over a frame of twigs, was good enough to keep. It was hung on the weaving room wall, where it stared down at her. Gradually, the straw whiskers disappeared, and large eyes—drawn in ink—faded.

Don't think that Ahl was too unhappy, or that her relatives had been unjust. Every child has to learn duty; and she'd gotten bored with her solitary play, as well as increasingly uncomfortable with hiding her props. Better to work at a loom and have ideas in her mind. No sneaking cousin could dis-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cover *these,* and everything she imagined was large and bright and well-made, the swords of real steel, sharp and polished, as bright as the best glass.

Two years passed. She became an adequate plain weaver, but nothing more. "We thought you might have a gift for beauty," said her mother. "The mask suggested this. But it's obvious that you lack the ability to concentrate, which is absolutely necessary in any kind of art. Anything worth doing is likely to be slow, difficult, and boring. This is not an invariable rule, but it works in most situations."

"Give her to me," said Ki. "Maybe she'd be happier in a more active life."

Ahl went to sea. At first, it was not an enjoyable experience, though she had little problem with motion sickness. Her difficulty lay in the same region as always: she spent too much time thinking about her stories. As a result, she was forgetful and careless. These are not good traits in an apprentice sailor; and Ki, who had always seemed pleasant and friendly at home in Helwar, turned out to be a harsh captain.

At first the punishment she gave to Ahl was work. Every ship is full of nasty jobs. Ahl did most of them and did them more than once. This didn't bother her. She wasn't lazy, and jobs—though nasty—required little thought. She could make up stories while she did them.

Her habit of inattention continued. Growing angry, Ki turned to violence. On several occasions, she stuck Ahl: hard slaps across the face. This also had no effect. The girl simply did not want to give up her stories. Finally, Ki beat her, using a knotted rope.

Most likely this shocks you. Nowadays we like to believe that our female ancestors never did harm to one another. It's men who are violent. Women have always used reason.

Remember this was a sailing ship in the days before radio and engines. Weather satellites did not warn sailors of approaching storms. Computers did not monitor the ship's condition and send automatic signals to the Navigation Service. Sailors had to rely on their own skill and discipline.

It was one thing to be forgetful in a weaving room. If you fail to tie off a piece of yarn, what can happen? At most, a length of cloth will be damaged. Now, imagine what happens if the same person fails to tie a rope on board a ship. Or forgets to fasten a hatch in stormy weather.

So, after several warnings and a final mistake, Ahl received her beating. By this time she was fourteen or fifteen, with a coat of fur made thick by cold weather. The fur protected her, though not entirely; and later, when she remembered the experience, it seemed that shame was the worst part: to stand naked on the ship's deck, trying to remain impassive, while Ki used the rope she had failed to tie across her back.

Around her, the other sailors did their work. They didn't watch directly, of course, but there were sideways glances, some embarrassed and others approving. Overhead the sky was cloudless. The ship moved smoothly through a bright blue ocean.

The next day she felt every bruise. Ki gave her another unpleasant cleaning job. All day she scraped, keeping her lips pressed together. In the evening she went on deck, less stiff than she'd been earlier, but tired and still sore. Ahl leaned on the rail and looked out at the ocean. In the distance, rays of sunlight slanted between grey clouds. Life was not entirely easy, she thought.

After a while, Ki's lover Hasu Ahl came next to her. Ahl had been named

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

after the woman, for reasons that don't come into this story, and they were alike in several ways, being both tall and thin, with small breasts and large, strong, capable hands. The main difference between them was their fur. Hasu Ahl's was dark grey, like the clouds which filled the sky, and her coloring was solid. Our Ahl was pale as fog. In addition, she had kept her baby spots. Dim and blurry, they dotted her shoulders and upper arms. Because of these, her childhood name had been Dapple.

Hasu Ahl asked how she felt.

"I've been better."

They became silent, both leaning on the rail. Finally Hasu Ahl said, "There's a story about your childhood that no one has told you. When you were a baby, a witch predicted that you would be important when you grew up. She didn't know in what way. I know this story, as do your mother and Ki and a few other people. But we didn't want your entire family peering at you and wondering, and we didn't want you to become vain or worried; so we kept quiet.

"It's possible that Ki's anger is due in part to this. She looks at you and thinks, 'Where is the gift that was promised us?' All we can see—aside from intelligence, which you obviously have—is carelessness and lack of attention."

What could she say? She was inattentive because her mind was full of stories, though the character who'd been like Ki had vanished. Now there was an orphan girl with no close relatives, ignored by everyone, except her three companions: the hero, the *tli,* and the stone. They cared for her in their different ways: the hero with nobility, the *tli* with jokes, and the stone with solid friendliness. But she'd never told anyone about her ideas. "I'm not yet fifteen," Ahl said.

"There's time for you to change," Hasu Ahl admitted. "But not if you keep doing things that endanger the ship and yourself. Ki has promised that if you're careless again, she'll beat you a second time, and the beating will be worse."

After that, Hasu Ahl left. Well, thought our heroine, this was certainly a confusing conversation. Ki's lover had threatened her with something like fame and with another beating. Adults were beyond comprehension.

Her concentration improved, and she became an adequate sailor, though Ki said she would never be a captain. "Or a second-in-command, like your namesake, my Ahl. Whatever your gift may be, it isn't sailing."

Her time on board was mostly happy. She made friends with the younger members of the crew, and she learned to love the ocean as a sailor does, knowing how dangerous it can be. The coast of the Great Southern Continent was dotted with harbor towns. Ahl visited many of these, exploring the steep narrow streets and multi-leveled market places. One night at a festival, she made love for the first time. Her lover was a girl with black fur and pale yellow eyes. In the torchlight, the girl's pupils expanded, till they lay across her irises like bars of iron or narrow windows that opened into a starless night.

What a fine image! But what could Ahl do with it?

Later, in that same port, she came to an unwalled tavern. Vines grew over the roof. Underneath were benches. Perig sat on one, a cup in his hand. She shouted his name. He glanced up and smiled, then his gaze slid away. Was she that old? Had she become a woman? Maybe, she thought, remembering the black-furred girl.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Where was Cholkwa?

In the south, Perig said.

Because the place was unwalled and public, she was able to sit down. The hostess brought *halin*. She tasted it, savoring the sharp bitterness. It was the taste of adulthood.

"Watch out," said Perig. "That stuff can make you sick."

Was his company here? Were they acting? Ahl asked.

Yes. The next night, in the town square.

"I'll come," said Ahl with decision.

Perig glanced at her, obviously pleased.

The play was about a hero, of course: a man who suspected that the senior women in his family, his mother and her sisters, had committed a crime. If his suspicion was true, their behavior threatened the family's survival. But no man can treat any woman with violence, and no man should turn against his mother. And what if he were wrong? Maybe they were innocent. Taking one look at the women, Ahl knew they were villains. But the hero didn't have her sharpness of vision. So he blundered through the play, trying to discover the truth. Men died, mostly at his hands, and most of them his kin. Finally he was hacked down, while the women looked on. A messenger arrived, denouncing them. Their family was declared untouchable. No one would deal with them in the future. Unable to interbreed, the family would vanish. The monstrous women listened like blocks of stone. Nothing could affect their stubborn arrogance.

A terrible story, but also beautiful. Perig was the hero and shone like a diamond. The three men playing the women were grimly convincing. Ahl felt as if a sword had gone through her chest. Her stories were nothing next to this.

Afterward, Ahl found Perig in the open tavern. Torches flared in a cool ocean wind, and his fur—touched with white over the shoulders—moved a little, ruffled. Ahl tried to explain how lovely and painful the play had been.

He listened, giving her an occasional quick glance. "This is the way it's supposed to be," he said finally. "Like a blade going to a vital spot."

"Is it impossible to have a happy ending?" she asked, after she finished praising.

"In this kind of play, yes."

"I liked the hero so much. There should have been another solution."

"Well," said Perig. "He could have killed his mother and aunts, then killed himself. It would have saved his family, but he wasn't sure they were criminals."

"Of course they were!"

"You were in the audience," said Perig. "Where *I* was standing, in the middle of the situation, the truth was less evident; and no man should find it easy to kill his mother."

"I was right, years ago," Ahl said suddenly. "*This* is what I want to do. Act in plays."

Perig looked unhappy.

She told him about her attempts to weave and be a sailor, then about the plays she had acted in the hayloft and the stories in her mind. For the first time, she realized that the stories had scenes. She knew how the hero moved, like Perig acting a hero. The *tli* had Cholkwa's brisk step and mocking voice. The stone was a stone. Only the girl was blurry. She didn't tell Perig about the scenes. Embarrassing to admit that this quiet aging man

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

lived in her mind, along with his lover and a stone. But she did tell him that she told stories.

He listened, then said, "If you were a boy, I'd go to your family and ask for you as an apprentice—if not this year, then next year. But I can't, Ahl. They'd refuse me and be so angry I might lose their friendship."

"What am I to do?" asked Ahl.

"That's a question I can't answer," said Perig.

A day later, her ship left the harbor. On the long trip home, Ahl considered her future. She'd seen other companies of actors. Perig and Cholkwa were clearly the best, but neither one of them would be willing to train her. Nor would any company that knew she was female. But most women in this part of the world were broad and full-breasted, and she was an entirely different type. People before, strangers, had mistaken her for a boy. Think of all the years she had acted in her loft, striding like Perig or mimicking Cholkwa's gait. Surely she had learned something!

She was seventeen and good at nothing. In spite of the witch's prediction, it wasn't likely she'd ever be important. It seemed to her now that nothing had ever interested her except the making of stories—not the linked verse epics that people recited on winter evenings, nor the tales that women told to children, but proper *stories,* like the ones that Perig and Cholkwa acted.

Before they reached Helwar, Ahl had decided to disguise herself as a boy and run away.

First, of course, she had to spend the winter at home. Much of her time was taken by her family. When she could, she watched her uncles and male cousins. How did they stand and move? What were their gestures? How did they speak?

The family warehouse was only half-full, she discovered. This became her theater, lit by high windows or (sometimes) by a lamp. She'd bought a square metal mirror in the south. Ahl leaned it against a wall. If she stood at a distance, she could see herself, dressed in a tunic stolen from a cousin and embroidered in the male style. Whenever possible, she practiced being a man, striding across the wood floor, turning and gesturing, speaking lines she remembered out of plays. Behind her were stacks of new-cut lumber. The fresh, sweet aroma of sawdust filled the air. In later life, she said this was the smell of need and possibility.

In spring, her ship went south again. Her bag, carefully packed, held boy's clothing, a knife and all her money.

In a town in the far south, she found an acting company, doing one of Perig's plays in ragged costumes. It was one she'd seen. They'd cut out parts.

So, thought Ahl. That evening, she took her bag and crept off the ship. The night was foggy, and the damp air smelled of unfamiliar vegetation. In an alley, she changed clothing, binding her four breasts flat with strips of cloth. She already knew where the actors were staying: a run-down inn by the harbor, not the kind of place that decent female sailors would visit. Walking through the dark streets, bag over her shoulder, she was excited and afraid.

Here, in this town, she was at the southern edge of civilization. Who could tell what the inland folk were like? Though she had never heard of any lineage that harmed women. If things got dangerous, she could pull off her tunic, revealing her real self.

On the other hand, there might be monsters; and they *did* harm women.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Pulling off her tunic would do no good if something with fangs and scales came out of the forest. At most, the thing might thank her for removing the wrapping on its dinner.

If she wanted to turn back, now was the time. She could be a less-than-good sailor. She could go home and look for another trade. There were plenty in Helwar, and women could do most of them. She hadn't really wanted to fish in the ocean, not after she killed the fish in the basin. As for the other male activities, let them *have* fighting and hunting dangerous animals! Let them log and handle heavy timbers! Why should women risk their lives?

She stopped outside the inn, almost ready to turn around. Then she remembered Perig in the most recent play she'd seen, at the moment when the play's balance changed. A kinsman lay dead at his feet. It was no longer possible to go back. He'd stood quietly, then lifted his head, opening his mouth in a great cry that was silent. No one in the audience made a noise. Somehow, through his silence and their silence, Ahl heard the cry.

She would not give that up. Let men have every other kind of danger. This was something they had to share.

She went in and found the actors, a shabby group. As she had thought, they were short-handed.

The senior man was pudgy with a scar on one side of his face. "Have you any experience?" he asked.

"I've practiced on my own," said Ahl.

The man tilted his head, considering. "You're almost certainly a runaway, which is bad enough. Even worse, you've decided you can act. If I was only one man short, I'd send you off. But two of my men are gone, and if I don't find someone, we won't be able to continue."

In this manner, she was hired, though the man had two more questions. "How old are you? I won't take on a child."

"Eighteen," said Ahl.

"Are you certain?"

"Yes," she answered with indignation. Though she was lying about almost everything else, eighteen was her age.

Maybe her tone convinced the man. "Very well," he said, then asked, "What's your name?"

"Dapple," she said.

"Of no family?"

She hesitated.

The man said, "I'll stop asking questions."

She had timed this well. They left the next morning, through fog and drizzling rain. Her comrades on the ship would think she was sleeping. Instead, she trudged beside the actors' cart, which was pulled by a pair of *tsina*. Her tunic, made of thick wool, kept out the rain. A broad straw hat covered her head. Oiled boots protected her feet against mud and pools of water.

From this point on, the story will call her Dapple. It's the name she picked for herself and the one by which she was known for the rest of her life. Think of her not as Helwar Ahl, the runaway girl, but Dapple the actor, whose lineage did not especially matter, since actors live on the road, in the uncertain regions that lie between family holdings and the obligations of kinship.

All day they traveled inland, through steep hills covered with forest.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Many of the trees were new to her. Riding in the cart, the pudgy man—his name was Manif—told her about the company. They did mostly comedies, though Manif preferred hero plays. "These people in the south are the rudest collection of louts you can imagine. They like nothing, unless it's full of erect penises and imitations of intercourse; and men and women watch these things together! Shocking!

"They even like plays about *breeding*, though I prefer—of course—to give them decent comedies about men having sex with men or women having sex with women. But if they insist on heterosexuality, well, we have to eat."

This sounded bad to Dapple, but she was determined to learn. Maybe there was more to comedy than she had realized.

They made camp by the side of the road. Manif slept in the cart, along with another actor: a man of twenty-five or so, not bad looking. The rest of them pitched a tent. Dapple got an outside place, better for privacy, but also wetter. The rain kept falling. In the cart, Manif and his companion made noise.

"Into the *halin*, I notice," said one of Dapple's companions.

"And one another," a second man added.

The third man said, "D'you think he'll go after Dapple here?"

It was possible, thought Dapple, that she'd done something stupid. Cholkwa had warned her about the south.

"He won't if Dapple finds himself a lover quickly," said the first man.

This might have been a joke, rather than an offer. Dapple couldn't tell. She curled up, her back to the others, hoping that no one would touch her. In time, she went to sleep.

The next day was clear, though the ground remained wet. They ate breakfast, then struck the tent and continued inland. The change in weather made Dapple more cheerful. Maybe the men would make no advances. If they did, she'd find a way to fend them off. They might be shabby and half as good as Perig and Cholkwa, but they didn't seem to be monsters or savages; and this wasn't the far north, where a war had gone on for generations, unraveling everything. People on this continent understood right behavior.

As she thought this, one of the *tsina* screamed and reared. An arrow was stuck in its throat.

"Bandits!" cried Manif and shook the reins, crying, "Go, go," to the animals.

But the shot animal stumbled, unable to continue; and the second *tsin* began to lunge, trying to break free of the harness and its comrade. The actors pulled swords. Dapple dove into the edge-of-forest brush. Behind her was shouting. She scrambled up a hill, her heart beating like a hammer striking an anvil, though more quickly. Up and up, hoping the bandits would not follow. At last she stopped. Her heart felt as if it might break her chest; her lungs hurt; all her breath was gone. Below her on the road was screaming. Not the *tsin* any longer, she thought. This sound was men.

When she was able to breathe, she went on, climbing more slowly now. The screaming stopped. Had the bandits noticed her? Had they counted the company? Four of them had been walking, while Manif and his lover rode. But the lover had been lying in back, under the awning, apparently exhausted by his efforts of the night before. If the bandits had been watching, they might have seen only five people.

No way to tell. She continued up the hill, finally reaching a limestone

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

bluff. There was a crack. She squeezed her way in, finding a narrow cave. There she stopped a second time, leaning against the wet rock, trying to control her breath. Somehow she'd managed to keep her bag. She dropped it at her feet and pulled her knife.

For the rest of the day, she waited, then through the night, dozing from time to time, waking suddenly. No one came. In the morning, she went down the hill, stopping often to listen. There was nothing to hear except wind in the foliage and small animals making their usual noises.

The road was empty, though there were ruts to show that a cart had passed by. Dapple saw no evidence that a fight had ever taken place. For a moment she stood with her mouth open, wondering. Had it been a dream? The attack and her flight from it? Or had the actors managed to drive off the bandits, then gone on, condemning her as a coward? Across the road, a bird took flight. Large and heavy, it was mottled black and white and green. Not a breed native to Helwar, but she knew it from her travels in the south. It ate everything, plant and animal, but had a special liking for carrion.

Dapple crossed the road. On the far side, beyond the bushes, was a hollow. Something lay there, covered by branches and handfuls of leaves. She moved one of the branches. Underneath was the shot *tsin,* dead as a stone; and underneath the *tsin* were the actors. She couldn't see them entirely, but parts protruded: a hand, a leg to the knee. One face—Manif's—stared up at her, fur matted with dark blood, one eye already gone.

Shaking, she replaced the branch, then sat down before she fell. For a while, she did nothing except rock, her arms around her knees, silent because she feared to mourn out loud.

Finally, she got up and uncovered the grave. There was no way for her to move the *tsin's* huge body, but she climbed down next to it, touching the actors, making sure they were all dead. Everything she touched was lifeless. There was nothing in the grave except the corpses. The bandits had taken everything else: the cart, the surviving *tsin* and the company's belongings. There was no way to bury the actors properly. If she tried, she would be leaving evidence of her existence.

She climbed back out of the grave. Where should she go? Back to the harbor town? But the bandits had obviously been waiting along the road, and they might have gone back to waiting. If so, they were likely to be where they'd been before: somewhere to the east.

If they intended to set a ambush farther west, surely they would have done a better job of covering the bodies. Birds had found them already. By tomorrow, this spot would be full of noisy, filthy eaters-of-carrion.

It's possible she wasn't thinking clearly in reasoning this out. Nonetheless, she decided to go west. According to Manif, there was a town less than a day's journey away: solid, fortified, and fond of acting. Slinging her bag over her shoulder, Dapple went on.

The road wound through a series of narrow valleys. After she had gone a short distance, she saw the cart ahead of her, motionless in the middle of the road. She glanced back, planning to run. Two men stood there, both holding swords. Goddess! Ahl glanced at the forest next to her. As she did so, a man stepped out of the blue-green shadow. He also held a sword.

"I should have gone east," said Dapple.

"Some of our cousins went in that direction. Most likely, you would have met them."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Was this the moment to reveal she was a woman? "Are you going to kill me?"

"That depends on what you do," the man said. "But I'd prefer not to."

The other bandits came close. There were four of them, all dressed in worn, stained clothing.

"He's handsome," said the youngest fellow, who had a bandage wrapped around one arm. "Worth keeping."

"For what purpose?" asked Dapple, feeling uneasy.

"We'll tell you later," said the man from the forest.

After that, they took her bag and knife, then tied her hands in front of her. The man with the injured arm took the rope's other end. "Come along, dear one. We have a long way to go before nightfall."

He led her off the road, onto a narrow path. Animals had made it, most likely. A second man followed. The others stayed behind.

The rest of the day they traveled through steep forest. Now and then, the path crossed a stream or went along a limestone outcropping. Dapple grew tired and increasingly afraid. She tried to reassure herself by thinking that men rarely killed women and that rape—of women by men, at least—was an almost unknown perversion.

But women rarely traveled alone. Obviously they came to little harm, if they stayed at home or traveled in large companies; and this was the south, the region where civilization ended; and these men were killers, as she had seen. Who could say what they might do?

For example, they might kill her before learning she was a woman. Was this the moment to tell them? She continued to hesitate, feeling ashamed by the idea of abandoning her disguise. She had wanted to be different. She had planned to fool other people by using her intelligence and skill. Now, at the first set-back, she was ready to give up.

What a finish to her ambitions! She might die in this miserable forest—like a hero in a play, though with less dignity.

Worst of all, she needed to urinate. She knew from Perig and Cholkwa that all actors drank only in moderation before they went on stage. But she hadn't thought that she'd be acting this afternoon. Her bladder was full and beginning to hurt.

Finally, she confessed her need.

"Go right ahead," one of her captors said, stopping by a tree.

"I'm modest and can't empty my bladder in front of other men."

"We won't watch," said the second bandit in a lying tone.

"Let me go behind those bushes and do it. You'll be able to see my head and shoulders. I won't be able to escape."

The bandits agreed, clearly thinking that she was some kind of fool. But who can explain the behavior of foreigners?

Dapple went behind the bushes. Now her childhood practice came in useful; unlike most women, she could urinate while standing up and not make a mess. From situations like these we learn to value every skill, unless it's clearly pernicious. Who can predict the future and say, this-and-such ability will never be of use? She rejoined the bandits, feeling an irrational satisfaction.

At nightfall, they came to a little stony valley far back in the hills. A stream ran out of it. They waded in through cold water. At the valley's end was a tall narrow cave. Firelight shone out. "Home at last!" said the bandit who held Dapple's rope.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

They entered. The cave widened at once. Looking around, Dapple saw a large stone room. A fire burned in the middle. Around it sat women in ragged tunics. A few children chased each other, making shrill noises like the cries of birds. At the back of the cave were more openings, two or maybe three, leading farther in.

"What have you brought?" asked one of the women, lifting her head. The fur on the woman's face was white with age, and the lenses of her eyes were cloudy.

"A fine young man to impregnate your daughters," said the man holding the rope.

The old woman rose and came forward. Her body was solid, and she moved firmly, though with a cane. Bending close, she peered at Dapple, then felt an arm. "Good muscle. How old is he?"

"Tell her," the man said.

"Eighteen."

"Men are active at that age, no question, but I prefer someone older. Who knows anything about a lad of eighteen? He hasn't shown the world his nature. His traits may be good or bad."

"This is true, mother," said the man with the rope. "But we have to take what we get. This one is alive and healthy. Most likely, he can do what we need done."

Dapple thought of mentioning that she could not impregnate a female, but decided to wait.

"Come over to the fire," the old woman said. "Sit down and talk with me. I like to know who's fathering the children in our family."

Dapple obeyed. The man went with them. Soon she was on the stone floor, a bowl of beer next to her. In her hand was a piece of greasy meat, a gift from the old woman. Around her sat the rest of the family: thin women with badly combed fur. Most likely they had bugs. One held a baby. The rest of the children were older, ranging from a girl of four or five to a boy at the edge of adulthood. The boy was remarkably clean for a member of this family, and he had a slim gracefulness that seemed completely out of place. The other children continued to run and scream, but he sat quietly among his female relatives, watching Dapple with eyes as yellow as resin.

The man, Dapple's captor, sat in back of her, out of sight, though when she moved her bound hands, she could feel him holding the rope.

There had been five families in these hills, the old woman said. None of them large or rich, but they survived, doing one thing or another.

Five lineages of robbers, thought Dapple.

"We all interbred, till we were close kin, but we remained separate families, so we could continue to interbreed and find lovers. The rest of the families in this region never liked us and would have nothing to do with us. We had no one except each other."

Definitely robbers.

In the end, the large and powerful families in the region combined against the five. One by one, they were destroyed. It was done in the usual way: the men were killed, the women and children adopted.

"But our neighbors, the powerful ones, never allowed any of the people they adopted to breed. They would not let women and children starve, but neither would they let traits like ours continue. We were poisoned and poisonous, they said.

"Imagine what it was like for those women and children! It's one thing for

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a woman to lose her family name and all her male relatives. That can be endured. But to know that nothing will continue, that her children will die without children! Some of the women fled into the hills and died alone. Some were found by us. We took them in, of course, and bred them when we could. But where could we find fathers? The men who should have impregnated our daughters—and the women we adopted—were dead.

"We are the last of the five families: more women than men, all of us poor and thin, with no one to father the next generation, except travelers like you.

"But we refuse to give up! We won't let rich and arrogant folk make us vanish from the world!"

Dapple thought while drinking her beer. "Why did your men kill the rest of our acting company? There were five more—all male, of course, and older than I am."

The bandit matriarch peered past Dapple. "Six men? And you brought only *one?*"

"They fought," said the man behind Dapple, his voice reluctant. "We became angry."

The matriarch hissed, a noise full of rage.

"One other is still alive," the man added. "My brothers will bring him along later."

"You wanted to rape him," said the matriarch. "What good do you think he'll be, after you finish? Selfish, selfish boys! Your greed will destroy us!"

Obviously, she had miscounted, when she climbed into the actors' grave. Who was still alive? Not Manif. She'd seen him clearly. Maybe his lover, who was young and handsome.

"Don't blame *me,*" said the man sullenly. "I'm not raping anyone. I'm here with this lad, and I haven't touched him. As for the other man, he'll still be usable. No one wants to make you angry."

The matriarch scratched her nose. "I'll deal with that problem when your brothers and male cousins return. In the meantime, tie up this man. I need to decide who should mate with him."

"Why should I do this?" asked Dapple. "There is no breeding contract between your family and mine. No decent man has sex with a woman, unless it's been arranged by his relatives and hers."

"We will kill you, if you don't!" said the man behind Dapple.

"What will you do if I agree to do this very improper thing?"

The people around the fire looked uneasy.

"One thing at a time," said the matriarch. "First, you have to make one of our women pregnant. Later, we'll decide what to do with you."

Dapple was led into another cave, this one small and empty except for a pallet on the floor and an iron ring set in the wall. Her captor tied her rope to the ring and left her. She sat down. Firelight came from the main cave, enough to light her prison. She tried to loosen the knots that held her. No luck. A cold draft blew down on her. At first, she thought it was fear. Glancing up, she saw a hole that led to starlight. Too far for her to reach, even if she could manage to free herself, and most likely too small to climb through. Only a few stars were visible. One was yellow and very bright: the Eye of Uson. It made her think of Manif's one eye. How was she going to escape this situation? The hole seemed unreachable, and the only other route was past the main cavern, full of bandits; and she was tired, far too tired to think. Dapple lay down and went to sleep.

She woke to feel a hand shaking her. Another hand was over her mouth.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Don't make any noise," a voice whispered.

She moved her head in a gesture of agreement. The hand over her mouth lifted. Cautiously, she sat up.

The fire in the main cave still burned, though more dimly. Blinking, she made out a slim figure. She touched an arm. The fur felt smooth and clean. "You are the boy."

"A man now. Fifteen this spring. Are you really an actor?"

"Yes."

"My father was one. They told me about him: a handsome man, who told jokes and juggled anything: fruit, stones, knives, though they never let him have sharp knives. After he made my mother pregnant, they kept him to impregnate another woman and because they enjoyed his company. But instead of doing as they planned, he escaped. They say, they'll never trust another foreigner—or keep a man alive so long that he knows his way through the caves. His name was Cholkwa. Have you ever heard of him?"

Dapple laughed quietly.

"What does *that* mean?" asked the boy.

"I've known him all my life. He stays at my family's house when he's on Helwar Island. Though he has never mentioned meeting your kin, at least when I was around."

"Maybe we weren't important to him," the boy said in a sad tone.

Most likely, Cholkwa kept silent out of shame. His own family was far to the north, across the Narrow Ocean, and she'd never heard him speak about any of them. Maybe he had no relatives left. There'd been war in the north for generations now. Sometimes it flared up; at other times it died to embers, but it never entirely ended; and many lineages had been destroyed.

He was a decent man, in spite of his lack of kin. How could he admit to breeding without a contract arranged by the senior women in his family? How could he admit to leaving a child who was related to him—granted, not closely, but a relative nonetheless—in a place like this?

"Will your relatives kill me?" Dapple asked.

"Once you have made one of my cousins pregnant, yes."

"Why are you here with me?"

"I wanted to know about my father." The boy paused. "I wanted to know what lies beyond these hills."

"What good will it do for you to know?"

There was silence for a while. "When I was growing up, my mother told me about Cholkwa, his stories and jokes and tricks. There are cities beyond the hills, he told her, and boats as big as our cave that sail on the ocean. The boats go from city to city, and there are places—halls and open spaces—where people go to see acting. In those places, Cholkwa is famous. Crowds of people come to see him perform the way he did for my family in this cave. Are these stories true?"

"Yes," said Dapple. "Everywhere he goes, people are charmed by him and take pleasure in his skill. No actor is more famous." She paused, trying to think of what to say next. The Goddess had given this boy to her; she must find a way to turn him into an ally. "He has no kin on this side of the ocean. Most likely, he would enjoy meeting you."

"Fathers don't care about their children, and we shouldn't care about them. Dead or alive, they do nothing for us."

"This isn't true," said Dapple with quiet anger. "Obviously, it makes sense for a child to stay with her mother and be raised by maternal kin. A

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

man can't nurse a baby, after all; and few mothers could bear to be separated from a small child. But the connection is still there. Most men pay some attention to their children, especially their sons. If something happens to the maternal lineage or to the relationship between a woman and her family, the paternal lineage will often step in. My mother is from Sorg, but she quarreled with her kin and fled to my father's family, the Helwar. They adopted her and me. Such things occur."

"Nothing has happened to my family," the boy said. "And my mother never quarreled with them, though she wasn't happy living here. I know that."

"Your family is not fit to raise children," said Dapple. "You seem to have turned out surprisingly well, but if you stay with them, they'll make you a criminal, and then you'll be trapped here. Do you really want to spend your life among thieves and people who breed without a contract? If you leave now and seek out Cholkwa, it may be possible for you to have a decent life."

The boy was silent for a moment, then exhaled and stood. "I have to go. They might wake."

A moment later, she was alone. She lay for a while, wondering if the boy would help her or if there was another way to escape. When she went back to sleep, she dreamt of Cholkwa. He was on a stage, dressed in bright red armor. His eyes were yellow and shone like stars. Instead of acting, he stood in a relaxed pose, holding a wooden sword loosely. "All of this is illusion and lies," he told her, gesturing at the stage. "But there's truth behind the illusion. If you are going to act, you need to know what's true and what's a lie. You need to know which lies have truth in back of them."

Waking, she saw a beam of sunlight shining through the hole in her ceiling. For a moment, the dream's message seemed clear and important. As she sat up, it began to fade and blur, though she kept the image of Cholkwa in his crimson armor.

One of the bandit males came and untied her. Together they went out, and she relieved herself behind bushes.

"I've never known anyone so modest," the bandit said. "How are you going to get a woman pregnant, if you can't bare yourself in front of a man?"

A good question, Dapple thought. Her disguise couldn't last much longer. Maybe she ought to end it. It didn't seem likely that the boy would help her; people didn't turn against their kin, even kin like these; and as long as the bandits thought she was a man, they might do anything. No rules protect a man who falls into the hands of enemies. She might be dead, or badly injured, before they realized she wasn't male. But something, a sense of foreboding, made her reluctant to reveal her true nature.

"We have sex in the dark," she told the bandit.

"That can be managed," he replied. "Though it seems ridiculous."

Dapple spent the rest of the day inside, alone at first, in a corner of the cave. The other bandits did not return, and the matriarch looked increasingly grim. Her kin sent their children outside to play. The men were gone as well. Those who remained—a handful of shabby women—worked quietly, giving the matriarch anxious glances. Clearly this was someone who could control her family! A pity that the family consisted of criminals.

At last, the old woman gestured. "Come here, man. I want to know you better."

Dapple settled by the fire, which still burned, even in the middle of a bright day. This wasn't surprising. The cave was full of shadows, and the air around them was cool and damp.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Instead of asking questions, the woman grumbled. It was hard work holding together a lineage, especially when all the neighboring families were hostile, and she got little help. Her female relatives were slovenly. "My eyes may be failing, but I can still smell. This place stinks like a midden heap!" Her male kin were selfish and stupid. "Five men! And they have brought me *one,* with another promised, though I'll believe in him when he appears!"

All alone, she labored to continue her line of descent, though only one descendant seemed really promising, the boy who'd been fathered by an actor. "A fine lad. Maybe there's something potent about the semen of actors. I hope so."

Evening came. The missing bandits did not appear. Finally the old woman looked at Dapple. "It seems our hopes rest in your hands—or if not in your hands, then in another part of your body. Is there a woman you prefer?"

Dapple glanced around. Figures lurked in the shadows, trying to avoid the matriarch's glance. Hard to see, but she knew what was there. "No."

"I'll pick one, then."

"There is something you ought to know," Dapple said.

The old woman frowned at her.

"I can't impregnate a woman."

"Many men find the idea of sex with women distasteful," the matriarch said. "But they manage the task. Surely your life is worth some effort. I promise you, you'll die if you don't try."

"I'm a woman," said Dapple. "This costume is a disguise."

"Ridiculous," the matriarch said. "Decent women don't wear men's clothing or travel with actors."

"I didn't say I was a decent woman. I said I was female and unable to father children. Don't you think—since I can't help you—you ought to let me go?"

"No matter what you are, we can't let you go," said the matriarch. "You might lead people to this cave." Then she ordered her kin to examine Dapple.

Three shabby women moved in. Standing, Dapple pulled off her tunic and underpants.

"No question about it," one of the women said. "She is female."

"What wretched luck!" cried the matriarch. "What have I done to deserve this kind of aggravation? And what's wrong with you, young woman, running around in a tunic and tricking people? Have you no sense of right behavior?"

There were more insults and recriminations, mostly from the old woman, though the others muttered agreement. What inhospitable and unmannerly folk! Dapple could hardly have fallen into a worse situation, though they weren't likely to kill her, now that they knew she was a woman.

At last, the matriarch waved a hand. "Tie her up for the night. I need to think."

Once again, Dapple found herself in the little side cave, tied to an iron ring. As on the previous night, stars shone through the hole in the ceiling, and firelight came down the corridor from the main cave, along with angry voices. Her captors were arguing. At this distance she couldn't make out words, but there was no mistaking the tone.

This time she made a serious effort to untie the rope that held her. But

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

her hands had been fastened together, and her fingers couldn't reach the knot. Gnawing proved useless. The rope was too thick and strong. Exhausted, she began to doze. She woke to a touch, as on the night before.

"Is it you again?" she asked in a whisper.

"My grandmother has chosen me to impregnate you," said the boy, sounding miserable.

"What do you mean?"

"If you can't father children on our women, then we'll father children on *you* and adopt the children, as you were adopted by your father's family. That plan will do as well as the first one, Grandmother says. The others say she's favoring me, but I don't want to do this."

"Breed without a contract? What man would? What are you going to do?"

"Have sex with you, though I've never had sex with anyone. But Grandmother has explained how it's done."

"You have reached a moment of decision," said Dapple. "If you make the wrong choice now, your life will lead to ruin, like the life of a protagonist in a hero play."

"What does that mean?"

"If you have sex with me against my will, and without a contract arranged by my female relatives, you will be a criminal forever. But if you set me free, I will lead you to your father."

"I have a knife," said the boy uncertainly. "I could cut you free, but there's no way out except through the main cave."

Dapple lifted her head, indicating the hole in the ceiling.

The boy gazed up at the stars. "Do you think you could get through?"

"I'd be willing to try, if there's no other way. But how do we reach it?"

"Standing on my shoulders won't do. It's too far up. But I could go outside and lower a rope. Can you climb one?"

"I've worked as a sailor," said Dapple. "Of course I can."

"I could tell them I need to urinate. I know where there's a rope. It could be done. But if they catch us—"

"If you stay here and do this thing, you will be a thief. Your children will be thieves. You'll never see the cities beyond these hills or the ships as big as caves."

The boy hesitated, then pulled his knife and cut Dapple free. "Wait here," he said fiercely, and left.

She rubbed her hands and wrists, then stood and stretched. Hah! How stiff she was!

Voices rose in the main cave, mocking the boy, then dropped back to a murmur. She began to watch the hole.

After a while, a dark shape hid the stars. A rope dropped toward her. Dapple grasped it and tugged. It held. She took off her tunic and tied it to the bottom of the rope, then began her climb, going hand over hand up the rope. Cold air blew past her, ruffling the fur on her arms and shoulders. It smelled of damp soil and forest. Freedom, thought Dapple. A moment or two later, she reached the hole. Hah! It was narrow! As bad as she had feared!

"Can you make it?" the boy whispered.

"I have to," Dapple said and continued to climb.

Her head was no problem, but her shoulders were too wide. Rough stone scraped against them. She kept on, trying to force her body through the opening. All at once, she realized that she was stuck, like a piece of wax used to seal the narrow neck of a jar. Dapple groaned with frustration.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Be quiet," whispered the boy and began to pull, leaning far back, all his weight on the rope. For a moment, she remained wedged in the hole. Then her shoulders were through, though some of her fur remained behind. Her elbows dug into dirt. She pushed up. The boy continued to pull, and Dapple popped into freedom. She stretched out on the damp ground, face down, smelling dirt, the forest, and the night wind.

"You have no clothing on!" the boy exclaimed.

"I took my tunic off," said Dapple. "I knew the fit would be tight."

"You can't travel like this!"

She pulled the rope out of the hole, retrieving her tunic and putting it on.

"Better," said the boy, though he still sounded embarrassed.

He had wrapped his end of the rope to a tree. She undid the knots and coiled the rope. "A knife, a rope, and four sound feet. I'd like more, but this will have to do. Let's go."

They set off through the forest, the boy leading, since he had good night vision, and this was his country.

"When will they discover that we are missing?" Dapple asked after a while.

"In the morning. Tonight they'll drink and tell each other rude stories about sex. Grandmother gave permission. It's lucky to do this, when people breed."

It was never lucky to breed without a contract, Dapple thought, but said nothing. How was this boy going to survive in the outside world, knowing so little about how to behave? She'd worry about that problem when both of them were safe.

They traveled all night. In spite of the boy's keen eyes, the two travelers stumbled often and hit themselves against branches, sometimes thorny. No one living in a town can imagine the darkness of a forest, even when the sky above the trees is full of stars. Certainly Dapple had not known, living in a harbor town. How she longed for an ocean vista, open and empty, with starlight glinting off the waves!

At dawn, they stopped and hid in a ravine. Water trickled at the bottom. Birds cried in the leaves, growing gradually quiet as the day grew warmer. Exhausted, the two young people dozed. Midway through the morning, voices woke them: men, talking loudly and confidently as they followed a nearby trail. The boy peered out. "It's my relatives," he said.

"Is anyone with them?" asked Dapple fearfully. What would they do, if one of the actors had survived and was a prisoner? It would be unbearable to leave the man with savages, but if she and the boy tried to free the man, they would be killed or taken prisoner like him.

"No," said the boy after a while. "They must have killed him, after they finished raping him. My grandmother will be so angry!"

These people were both monsters and fools. Was there anything she could learn from the situation? Maybe the nature of monsters, if she ever had to portray a monster in a play. The nature of monsters, Dapple thought as she crouched in the ravine, was folly. That was the thing she had to concentrate on, not her own sense of fear and horror.

After a while, the boy said, "They're gone. I didn't expect them to come this direction. But now that they've passed us, we'd better put as much distance as possible between us and them."

They rose and went on. Shortly thereafter, they found the robbers' camp: a forest clearing with the remains of a fire and Dapple's last companion,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Manif's lover. He must have endured as much as he could, then fought back. There were various wounds, which Dapple did not look at closely, and a lot of blood, which had attracted bugs.

"Dead," said the boy. "They should have buried him, but we can't take the time."

Dapple went to the edge of the clearing and threw up, then covered her vomit with forest debris. Maybe the robbers wouldn't find it, if they came back this way. Though the moist ground should tell the bandits who'd been here.

The boy must have thought the same thing. After that, they traveled through streams and over rocks. It was a hard journey.

Late in the afternoon, they descended into a valley. At the bottom was a larger-than-usual stream. The forest canopy was less thick than before. Sunlight speckled the ground. "We are close to the border of our country," the boy said. "From this point on, it will be best to follow trails."

One ran along the stream, narrow, and used more by animals than people, Dapple thought. The travelers took it. After a while, a second stream joined the first. Together, they formed a river where small rapids alternated with pools. At sunset, turning a corner, they discovered a group of men swimming. Clothes and weapons lay on the river bank.

The boy stopped suddenly. "Ettin."

"What?" asked Dapple.

"Our enemies," he answered, sounding fearful, then added, "The people I am bringing you to. Go forward. I cannot." He turned to go back the way they had come. Behind him the sky was sunset red; the boy's face was in shadow. Nonetheless, Dapple saw his mouth open and eyes widen.

A harsh voice said, "Neither can you go back, thief."

She turned as well. A man stood in the trail, short and broad with a flat ugly face. A metal hat covered the top of his head and was fastened under his chin with a leather strap. His torso was covered with metal-and-leather armor. A skirt made of leather strips hung to his knees. One hand held a sword, the blade bare and shining. She had never seen anyone who looked so unattractive.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"A guard. You can't believe that men of Ettin would bathe without posting guards."

"I'm from the north," said Dapple. "I know nothing about Ettin, which I imagine is your lineage."

He made a noise that indicated doubt. "The north? And this one as well?" The sword tip pointed at her companion.

"I was traveling with actors," Dapple said. "Robbers killed my comrades and took me prisoner. This lad rescued me and was guiding me to safety."

The guard made another noise that indicated doubt. Other men gathered. Some were guards out of the forest. The rest were bathers, their fur slick with water and their genitalia exposed. She knew what male babies and boys looked like, of course, but this was the first time she'd seen men. They weren't as big as she'd imagined, after Cholkwa's plays. Nonetheless, the situation was embarrassing. She glanced back at the first guard, meeting his eyes.

"Are you threatening me?" he asked.

"Of course not."

"Then look down! What kind of customs do you have in the north?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She looked at the ground. The air smelled of wet fur. "What's this about?" the men asked. "What have you captured?"

"Some kind of foreigner, and a fellow of unknown lineage, though local, I think. They say they've escaped from the robbers."

"If done, it's well done," said a swimmer. "But they may be lying. Take them to our outpost, and let the captain question them. If they're spies, he'll uncover them."

Who is talking about uncovering? Dapple thought. A man with water dripping off him and his penis evident to anyone who cared to look! Not that she glanced in his direction. It was like being in an animal play, though maybe less funny.

Other men made noises of agreement. The swimmers went off to dry and dress. The men in armor tied Dapple's hands behind her back, then did the same for the boy. After that, they ran a second rope from Dapple's neck to the boy's neck. "You won't run far like this!" one said when the second rope was fastened.

"Is this any way to treat guests?" asked Dapple.

"You may be spies. If you are not, we'll treat you well. The Ettin have always been hospitable and careful."

Tied like animals going to market, they marched along the trail, which had grown wider and looked better-used. Half the men went with them. The rest stayed behind to guard the border.

Twilight came. They continued through darkness, though under an open sky. By this time, Dapple was dazed by lack of sleep. One of the guards took her arm, holding her upright and guiding her. "You're a pretty lad. If you are what you say, maybe we can keep company."

Another guard said, "Don't listen, stranger. You can do better than Hattin! If you are what you say."

Her male disguise was certainly causing problems, though she needed it, if she was going to learn acting. What was she learning now? Danger and fear. If she survived and made it home, she would think about specializing in hero plays.

Ahead of them gleamed firelight, shining from windows. A sword hilt knocked on a door. Voices called. Dapple could not understand what they were saying, but the door opened. Entering, she found herself in a courtyard made of stone. On one side was a stable, on the other side, a square stone tower.

She and the boy were led into the tower. The ground floor was a single room with a fireplace on one side. A man sat next to the fire in a high-backed wooden chair. His grey fur was silvered by age, and he was even uglier than his relatives.

"This is Ettin Taiin," said the guard named Hattin. "The man who watches this border, with our help."

The man rose and limped forward. He'd lost an eye, though not recently, and did not bother to hide the empty socket. "Poor help *you* are!" he said, in a voice like stone grating against stone. "Nonetheless, I manage." He looked directly at Dapple. The one eye that remained was bright blue; the pupil expanded in the dim light, so it lay across his iris like a black iron bar across the sky. "Who are you, and what are you doing in the land I watch?"

She told her story a second time.

"That explains *you*," said Ettin Taiin. "And I'm inclined toward belief. Your accent is not local, nor is your physical type, though you are certainly

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

lovely in a foreign way. But this lad—" He glared at the boy. "Looks like a robber."

The boy whimpered, dropping to the floor and curling like a frightened *tli*. Because they were tied together, Dapple was pulled to her knees. She looked at the border captain. "There is more to the story. I am not male!"

"What do you mean?" asked Ettin Taiin, his voice harsher than before.

"I wanted to be an actor, and women are not allowed to act."

"Quite rightly!" said the captain.

"I disguised myself as a young man and joined a company here in the south, where no one knows me, and where I'm not likely to meet actors I know, such as Perig and Cholkwa."

"Cholkwa is here right now," said the captain, "visiting my mother and her sisters. What a splendid performer he is! I nearly ruptured myself laughing the last time I saw him. If he knows you, then he can speak for you; *I* am certainly not going to find out whether or not you're female. My mother raised me properly."

"An excellent woman," murmured the guards standing around.

"When the robbers captured me, I told them I was female, and they told this lad to impregnate me."

"With no *contract*? Without the permission of your female relatives?" The stony voice was full of horror.

"Obviously," said Dapple. "My relatives are on Helwar Island, far to the north."

"You see what happens when women run off to foreign places, without the protection of the men in their family?" said the captain. "Not that this excuses the robbers in any way. We've been lax in letting them survive. Did he do it?"

The boy, still curled on the floor, his hands over his head, made a keening noise. The guards around her exhaled, and Dapple thought she heard the sound of swords moving in their scabbards.

"No," Dapple said. "He got me out of prison and brought me here. That's the end of the story."

"Nasty and shocking!" said the captain. "We will obviously have to kill the rest of the robber men, though it won't be easy to hunt them down. The children can be adopted, starting with this lad. He looks young enough to keep. The women are a problem. I'll let my female relatives deal with it, once we have captured the women. I only hope I'm not forced into acts that will require me to commit suicide after. I'm younger than I look and enjoy life!"

"We'd all prefer to stay alive," said Hattin.

"Untie them," said the captain, "and put them in separate rooms. In the morning, we'll take them to my mother."

The guards pulled the two of them upright and cut their ropes. The captain limped back to his chair. "And feed them " he added as he settled and picked up a cup. "Give the woman my best *halin.*"

Leading them up a flight of stairs, Hattin said, "If you're a woman, then I apologize for the suggestion I made. Though I wasn't the *only* one who thought you'd make a good bedmate! Ettin Taiin is going to be hearing jokes about that for years!"

"You tease a man like him?" asked Dapple.

"I don't, but the senior men in the family do. The only way someone like that is tolerable, is if you can embarrass him now and then."

Her room had a lantern, but no fire. It wasn't needed on a mild spring

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

night. Was the man downstairs cold from age or injuries? The window was barred, and the only furniture was a bed. Dapple sat down. The guards brought food and drink and a pissing pot, then left, locking the door. She ate, drank, pissed, and went to sleep.

In the morning, she woke to the sound of nails scratching on her door. A man's voice said, "Make yourself ready." Dapple rose and dressed. The night before, she'd unbound her breasts in order to sleep comfortably. She didn't rebind them now. The tunic was thick enough to keep her decent; her breasts weren't large enough to need support, and the men of Ettin were treating her like a woman. Better to leave the disguise behind, like a shell outgrown by one of the animals her male relatives pulled from the sea.

Guards escorted her and the boy downstairs. There were windows on the ground floor, which she hadn't noticed the night before. Shutters open, they let in sunlight. The Ettin captain stood at a table covered with maps. "Good morning," he said. "I'm trying to decide how to trap the robbers. Do you have any suggestions, lad? And what is your name?"

"Rehv," the boy said. "I never learned to read maps. And I will not help you destroy my family!"

Ettin Taiin rolled the maps—they were paper, rather than the oiled leather her people used—and put them in a metal tube. "Loyalty is a virtue. So is directness. You'll make a fine addition to the Ettin lineage; and I'll decide how to destroy *your* lineage later. Today, as I told you before, we'll ride to my mother."

They went out and mounted *tsina,* the captain easily in spite of his lame leg, Dapple and the boy with more difficulty.

"You aren't riders," said Ettin Taiin. "And that tells me your families don't have many *tsina.* Good to know, for when I hunt the robbers down."

They spent the day riding, following a narrow road through forested hills. A small group of soldiers accompanied them, riding as easily as the captain and joking among themselves. Now and then they saw a cabin. "Hunters and trappers," said Ettin Taiin. "There are logging camps as well. But no women. The robbers are too close. Time and time again we've tried to clean them out, but they persist, growing ever more inbred and nasty."

Riding next to her, the boy shivered, hair rising on his arms and shoulders. Now that she was apparently safe, Dapple felt pity and respect for him. He'd been confronted by the kind of decision a hero faces in a play. Should he side with his kin or with right behavior? A man without kin was like a tree without roots. The slightest wind would push him over. A man without morality was like—what? A tree without sunlight and rain.

In most cases, hero plays ended in death. It was the easiest resolution. Unable to make a definite choice, the hero blundered through a series of half-actions and mistakes, until he was killed by enemies or friends, and the audience exhaled in relief. May the Goddess keep them from this kind of situation!

Most likely, the boy would live to see his relatives die, while he was adopted by the Ettin. It was the right ending for the story of a child. Their duty was to live and grow and learn. Honor belonged to older people. Nonethe-less, the story disturbed Dapple, as did the boy's evident unhappiness and fear.

Late in the afternoon, they entered a wide flat valley. The land was cultivated. The buildings scattered among fields and orchards were made of planks rather than logs. Many were painted: blue-grey, green, or white.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Barns," said the Ettin captain. "Stables. Houses for herdsmen."

She was back in the ordinary world of people who understood rules, though she wasn't certain the Ettin followed the rules she had learned on Helwar Island. Still, the pastures were fenced, the fields plowed in straight lines, and the orchard trees—covered with pale orange blossoms—were orderly.

They reached the captain's home as the sun went down. It was a cluster of buildings made of wood and stone, next to a river crossed by a stone bridge. The lower stories had no windows, and the doors were iron-bound. Built for defense, but no enemies were expected today. The largest door was open. Riding through it, they entered a courtyard surrounded by balconies. Children played in the early evening shadows, though Dapple couldn't make out the game; it stopped the moment they appeared.

"Uncle Taiin!" cried several voices.

The captain swung down stiffly and was surrounded by small bodies.

"An excellent man," said one of the guards to Dapple. "Affectionate with children, respectful toward women, and violent toward other men."

"Even men of your family?" Dapple asked.

"We win, and most of us come home; we don't expect kindness from a leader on campaign."

A woman came into the courtyard, tall and broad, wearing a sleeveless robe. Age had whitened her face and upper arms. She carried a staff and leaned on it, but her head was erect, her blue eyes as bright as a polished blade.

The children fell silent and moved away from their uncle. He lifted his head, looked straight at the old woman, and gave her a broad, boyish grin. Beyond question, this was his mother. Could actors replicate this moment? No. Children were not used in plays, and everything here was small and quiet: the man's grin, the woman's brief returning smile.

"Taiin," she said in greeting. Nothing more, but the voice rang—it seemed to Dapple—with joy. Her steel blue eyes flashed toward Dapple and the boy. "Tell me the names of our guests."

He did, adding, "The girl, if this *is* a girl, says that Cholkwa the actor will speak for her. The boy is almost old enough to be killed, but if he saved her, then he's worth saving."

"I will form my own judgment," said the matriarch. "But she's clearly a girl."

"Are you certain?"

"Use your *eye,* Taiin!"

He obeyed with a slow sideways look. "She does seem more feminine than she did yesterday. But I'd be happier if she had on female clothing. Then, maybe, I could see her as a woman entirely. Right now, she seems to shift back and forth. It's very disturbing!"

"I'll give her a bath and new clothes," said the matriarch with decision. "You take care of the boy."

Dapple dismounted. The old woman led her through shadowy halls to a courtyard with two pools built of stone. Steps led down into each. One seemed ordinary enough, the water in it colorless and still; but the other was full of bright green water. Steam rose from its surface; the air around it had an unfamiliar, slightly unpleasant odor.

"It comes from the ground like this," said the matriarch. "We bring it here through pipes. The heat is good for old bones, stiff muscles, and the kind of injuries my son Taiin has endured. Undress! Climb in!"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Dapple obeyed, pulling off her tunic. The matriarch exhaled. "A fine-looking young woman, indeed! A pity that you won't be bred!"

Because she had bad traits. Well, she didn't mind. She had never wanted to be a mother, only an actor. Dapple entered the steaming water, sinking until she was covered. Hah! It was pleasant, in spite of the aroma! She stretched out and looked up. Though shadows filled the courtyard, the sky above was full of light. A cloud like a feather floated there. Last night, she'd slept in a guard house. The night before, she'd scrambled through a dark forest; and before that, she'd been in a cave full of robbers. Now she was back in a proper house—not entirely like her home, but close enough.

Women appeared, bringing a chair for the matriarch, and a clothing rack, on which they hung new clothes for Dapple. Then they left. The matriarch sat down, laying her staff on the court's stone floor. "Why did you disguise yourself as a man?"

Dapple told her story, floating in the steaming pool. The old woman listened with obvious attention. When the story was done, she said, "We've been negligent. We should have cleared those people out years ago. But I—and my sisters and our female cousins—didn't want to adopt the robber women. They'll be nothing but trouble!"

This was true, thought Dapple, remembering the women in the cave, especially the robber matriarch. That was not a person who'd fit herself quietly into a new household. Hah! She would struggle and plot!

"But something will have to be done. We can't let these folk rob and murder and force men to breed. No child should come into existence without the agreement of two families. No man should become a father without a proper contract. We are not animals! I'm surprised at Cholkwa. Surely it would be better to die, than to reproduce in this fashion."

She might have agreed before her recent experiences; but now, life seemed precious, as did Cholkwa and every person she knew and liked. If he had refused to cooperate with the robbers, she would have lost him when she barely knew him; and the boy who saved her would never have come into existence. The thought of her fate without the boy was frightening.

Maybe none of this would have happened, if Cholkwa had died before she saw him act. Without him, she might have been content to stay in Helwar. Hardly likely! She would have seen Perig, and he was the one she wanted to imitate. Comedy was fine. Cholkwa did it beautifully. But she didn't want to spend her life making rude jokes.

Nor did she want to do exactly what *Perig* did. His heroes were splendid. When they died, she felt grief combined with joy. They were so honorable! Perig had so much skill! But her recent experiences suggested that real death was nothing like a play. Manif and his comrades would not rise to shouts of praise. Their endings had been horrible and final and solved nothing. *Death* was the problem here, rather than the problem's solution. Why had they died? Why was she alive? Were tragedy and comedy the only alternatives? Did one either die with honor or survive in an embarrassing costume?

These were difficult questions, and Dapple was too young to have answers, maybe too young to ask the questions clearly. But something like these ideas, though possibly more fragmentary, floated in her mind as she floated in the steaming pool.

"That's enough heat," the matriarch said finally. "It will make you dizzy, if you stay too long. Go to the second pool and cool down!"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Dapple obeyed, pausing on the way to pick up a ball of soap. This water was pleasant too. Not cold, but cool, as the matriarch had suggested, and so very fresh! It must come from a mountain stream. The soap lathered well and smelled of herbs. She washed herself entirely, then rinsed. The robbers would stay in her mind, but the stink of their cave would be out of her fur. In time, her memories would grow less intense, though she didn't want to forget the boy—and was it right to forget Manif and the other actors?

She climbed out of the second pool. A towel hung on the clothing rack, also a comb with a long handle. She used both, then dressed. The young women in this country wore kilts and vests. Her kilt was dark blue, the fabric soft and fine. Her vest was made of thicker material, bright red with silver fasteners down the front. The Ettin had provided sandals as well, made of dark blue leather.

"Beyond question you are a handsome young woman," the matriarch said. "Brave and almost certainly intelligent, but far too reckless! What are we going to do with you?"

Dapple said nothing, having no answer. The matriarch picked up her staff and rose.

They went through more shadowy halls, coming finally to an open door. Beyond was a terrace made of stone. A low wall ran along the far side. Beyond the wall was the river that ran next to the house, then pastures rising toward wooded hills. Everything was in shadow now, except the sky and the very highest hill tops. Two men sat on the terrace wall, conversing: Ettin Taiin and Cholkwa. The robber boy stood nearby, looking far neater and cleaner than before. Like Dapple, he wore new clothes: a kilt as brown as weathered bronze, and sandals with brass studs. Looking from him to Cholkwa, she could see a resemblance. Hah! The boy would be loved by many, when he was a little older!

"I have introduced Cholkwa to his son," Ettin Taiin said to his mother.

Cholkwa stood and made a gesture of greeting. His gaze met Dapple's briefly, then passed on as if she were a stranger. "What a surprise, Hattali! When I left the cave, running as quickly as possible, I did not know the woman was likely to produce a child."

"You should have come to us, as soon as you escaped," the matriarch said. "If we'd known what the robbers were doing, we would have dealt with them years ago. Do you know this young woman?"

"She is Helwar Ahl, the daughter of a family that's dear to me. A good young person, though Taiin tells me she has some crazy idea of becoming an actor."

"I told you that!" cried Dapple.

"*I* told you it was impossible! My life is dangerous and disreputable, Ahl. No woman should lead it!" He glanced toward the matriarch. "My stay with the robbers occurred during my first trip south. I didn't know your family, or much of anyone. After I escaped, I fled to the coast and took the first ship I could find going north. Hah! I was frightened and full of self-disgust! It was several years before I came south again. By then, I had convinced myself that the woman could not have been pregnant. I half-believed the story was a dream, caused by a southern fever. How could I think that such people were possible and real?"

"I am," said the boy. "We are."

"Think of the men who have died because you did not tell your story!" the matriarch said to Cholkwa. "Think of the children who have been raised by

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

criminals! How can they possibly turn out well? What kind of person would turn away from children in such a situation?"

Cholkwa was silent for a moment, then said, "I have no excuse for my behavior. I did what I did."

"Remember that he makes his living as a comic actor," said the Ettin captain. "How can we judge a man who spends his time portraying small animals with large sexual organs? Let's put these lost-past happenings off to the side. We have enough problems in the present."

"This is true," said the matriarch. "For one thing, I need a chair."

"I'll tend to that," said Cholkwa and hurried off.

The captain, still lounging comfortably on the wall, glanced at his mother. "Have you decided how to deal with the robbers?"

The old woman groaned, leaning on her staff and looking morose. "You will have to kill the men, and we will have to adopt the women and children, though I do not look forward to having females like these in our houses."

"This is a relief! I thought, knowing your opinion of the robber women, that you might ask me to kill them."

"Would you do it?"

"If you told me to, yes."

"And then what?"

"Why ask, mother? The answer is obvious. I have always wanted to be famous, not infamous. If I had to do something so dishonorable, there would be no alternative left except suicide!"

"This is what I expected," the matriarch said. "Listening to Helwar Ahl's story, I asked myself, 'What is worse? Taiin's death, or a house full of unruly women?' No one should have to make such a decision! But I have made it, and I will endure the consequences."

"Be more cheerful! If you spread the women out among many houses, they may not be much of an aggravation."

"We'll see. But I'm glad to know that you are an honorable man, Taiin, though it means your old mother will suffer."

"Think of the pleasure you'll be able to take in my continued survival," the captain said. "Not every mother of your age has a living son, especially one with my excellent moral qualities."

What a fine pair they were, thought Dapple. She could see them in a play: the fierce soldier and his indomitable parent, full of love and admiration for each other. In a hero play, of course, the captain would die and the matriarch mourn. Hah! What a sight she would be, alone on a stage, standing over the captain's body!

Women came onto the terrace with chairs and lanterns. The matriarch settled herself. "Bring food!"

"Now?" asked a middle-aged woman. "When you are with company?"

"Bring food for them as well," said the matriarch.

"Mother!" said the captain.

"I'm too old and hungry to care about that kind of propriety. Manners and morality are not the same."

The rest of them sat down, all looking uneasy. The women brought food. Dapple discovered she was ravenous, as was the boy, she noticed. The two men poured themselves cups of *halin*, but touched no food. The matriarch ate sparingly. It wasn't as bad as Dapple had expected, since no one spoke. This wasn't like a pack of carnivores snarling over their downed prey, or

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

like the monsters in old stories who chattered through mouths full of people. This meal was like travelers in a tavern, eating together because they had to, but quickly and in decent silence.

Soon enough they were done. The matriarch took a cup of *halin* from her son. "One problem has been solved. We will adopt the robber women. Cholkwa's behavior will be forgotten. My son is right! We have no ability to judge such a man, and Taiin—I know—wants to keep Cholkwa as a friend."

"This is true," said the captain.

"Only one problem remains: the girl, Helwar Ahl."

"No," said the robber boy. "I also am a problem." He glanced at Cholkwa. "I don't want to stay here and watch these people kill my male relatives. Take me with you! I want to see foreign harbors and ships as large as caves!"

Cholkwa frowned. For a moment, there was silence.

Ettin Taiin refilled his cup. "This might be a good idea for two reasons. The boy is likely to suffer from divided loyalties. That's always a problem when one adopts a child as old as he is. And I find him attractive. If he stays here and becomes Ettin, I will be troubled with incestuous thoughts. As much as possible, I try to keep my mind free of disturbing ideas. They cause sleepless nights on campaign and slow reflexes in battle."

"What about Helwar Ahl?" asked Cholkwa, obviously trying to go from one topic to another.

"She can't go with you," the matriarch said. "A woman with an unrelated man! And we are not ocean sailors, nor are the other families in this region, the ones we trust. Take the boy, if he's going to give Taiin perverted ideas, and tell the girl's family, when you get north, that she's here with us. They can send a ship for her."

"I want to be an actor," said Dapple.

"You can't!" said Cholkwa.

The matriarch frowned. "There are two things that men cannot do. One is have babies, because it's impossible. The other is harm women and children, because it's wrong. And there are two things that women cannot do: father children and fight in a war. These are absolute prohibitions. All other kinds of behavior may be difficult or disturbing, but they *can* be done. Granted, I would not want a daughter of mine to become an actor, though it might help make plays more interesting. There are too many penises in comedy, and too many honorable deaths in tragedy. These are male interests. Maybe the world would benefit from a play about real life!"

"Surely you don't mean that, mother," the Ettin captain said.

"You're a fine lad and my favorite child, but there is much you don't know. The world does not consist entirely of sex and violence. It isn't only men who take action, and there are kinds of action that do not involve violence or sex."

Dapple said, "I will run away again, I promise."

"From here?" asked the matriarch. "Surely you have learned how dangerous the south can be."

"From anywhere," said Dapple.

Ettin Hattali sipped *halin*. The others watched her. By this time, the sky was dark and full of stars, which shed enough light so that Dapple could see the old woman's pale face. "Life is made of compromises," Hattali said finally. "I will offer you one. Stay here until your family sends for you, and I will argue for you with them. You are useless for breeding already. A girl

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

who runs off in all directions! This is not a trait any family will want to continue. I'll say as much and argue that the world needs women who speak for women, not just in our houses and the meetings between families, but everywhere, even in plays. Who knows where the current interest in drama will lead? Maybe—in time—plays will be written down, though this seems unlikely to me. But if they remain at all, in any form, as spoken words or memory, women should have a share in them. Do we want men to speak for us to future generations?

"Cholkwa, who has broken many rules before, can certainly break another one and teach you. If he wants the story of his behavior with the robbers kept quiet, if he wants to keep my son Taiin as a lover, he will cooperate."

Taiin and Cholkwa—lovers? For a moment, Dapple was distracted. This certainly explained why Taiin found the boy attractive. How could Cholkwa betray his long-time lover, Perig, for a lame man with one eye?

Her family's old friend sighed. "Very well, I'll take the boy. No question I behaved badly when I mated with his mother. To create life without a contract! It was shameful! And you are right that I should have told my story. Then he would have gotten a proper home as a baby. Now he is old enough to love and mourn those criminals. I will not leave him here to watch his family die." He paused.

"And I will take your message to the Helwar. But I don't like the idea of teaching the girl to act."

"If you don't do it, I will ask Perig, or run off in disguise again!"

"Have the young always been this much trouble?" Cholkwa asked.

"Always," said the matriarch in a firm tone.

The captain stood up. "My leg aches, and I want either sleep or sex. Take the boy north, so he doesn't bother me. Take the message, so my mother can be happy. Worry about teaching the girl next year."

The two men left, the boy following. He would be put in a room by himself, the captain said as they walked into the house. "It's been a hard few days for you, Rehv my lad; and I don't think you need to deal with Ettin boys."

Dapple was alone with the matriarch, under a sky patterned with darkness and light.

"He made me angry when he used the word 'can't' for a woman," Ettin Hattali said. "No man has the right to say what women can and cannot do. Hah! I am old, to lose my temper and talk about women acting! But I will keep our agreement, young Ahl. What I said about plays is true. They are fine in their way, but they do not tell *my* story. So many years, struggling to keep my family going toward the front! The purpose of life is not to have honor and die, it's to have honor and *survive,* and raise the next generation to be honorable. Who says *that* in any play?"

"I will," said Dapple and felt surprise. Was she actually going to become an actor and write plays? For the first time, her plan seemed possible rather than crazy. Maybe she wouldn't be dragged back to safety. Maybe, with the matriarch on her side, she could have the life she wanted.

The moment an idea becomes solid is the moment when another person reaches out and takes it in her grasp. How frightening this is! The fur on Dapple's shoulders rose. "Do you think Cholkwa will agree to teach me?"

"Most likely, when he gets used to the idea. He's a good man, though foreign, and we have been his hosts many times over. That is a bond—not equal to kinship, perhaps, but strong; and there is also a bond between

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Cholkwa and Taiin. You may not believe this of my son, but he can persuade."

They sat a while longer under the stars. A meteor fell, then another. Dapple's fur was no longer bristling. Instead, her spirit began to expand.

Two Knots that Tie off the Story

Cholkwa took the boy as promised, and Rehv traveled with his father's acting company for several years. But he had no gift for drama and no real liking for travel. Finally, in one harbor town or another, he fell in love. The object of his desire was a glassblower who made floats for fishing nets: good plain work that brought in an adequate income. The two men settled down together. Rehv learned to make glass floats and went on to finer work: *halin* cups, pitchers for beer, bowls for holding sand or flowers.

Sometimes he made figures, cast rather than blown: actors, soldiers, matriarchs, robbers, decorated with gold and silver leaf. The actors' robes were splendid; the weapons held by the soldiers and robbers gleamed; only the matriarchs lacked decoration. They stood on the shelves of his lover's shop—as green as the ocean, as red as blood, as black as obsidian.

Most people knew he had been an actor and had settled down because of love. Only his lover knew the entire story. He had grown up amid desperation and craziness; through luck and his own actions, he had managed to achieve an ordinary life.

Dapple's relatives agreed to let her learn acting, and Perig agreed to teach her. She traveled with him for several years, accompanied by one of her male cousins, who ended by becoming an actor himself. In time, she established her own company, composed of women. She was always welcome in Ettin, and Ettin Hattali, who lived to be 110, attended Dapple's performances whenever possible, though toward the end she could no longer see the actors. She could still hear the voices, Hattali told her relatives; and they were the voices of women. ○

READERS: If you are having problems finding *Asimov's Science Fiction* at your favorite retailer, we want to help. First let the store manager know that you want the store to carry *Asimov's*. Then send us a letter or postcard telling us the full name and address of the store (with street name and number, if possible). Write to us at: Asimov's Science Fiction, Dept. NS, 6 Prowitt St., Norwalk, CT 06855-1220. Thank you!

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ON BOOKS

Peter Heck

The majority of today's SF novels are parts of series—sequels, prequels, or otherwise connected to the author's other work. It's easy to understand why. First of all, an author gets the chance to build characters and a fictional universe at greater depth than a single book allows. Equally important, if the series hits a nerve with readers, there is a chance to build repeat readership. And of course editors and publishers like series, because it's easier to convince bookstores (especially the chains) to stock a familiar commodity than to take a chance on a one-of-a-kind item.

But there is a definite downside to the trend. Later books in a series can rely so much on a reader's familiarity with what has gone before that a new reader is practically forced to pick up the series at the beginning to make any sense of it. Prequels are prone to devote most of their energy to nudging the readers familiar with earlier volumes, saying in effect, "Here comes you-know-who!" or attempting to invent an interesting past for a popular character. Too often these books are afterthoughts, written primarily for fans already hooked on the series.

As a result, series books beyond the first can be the worst possible point of entry for a reader new to an author's work. I doubt if many readers whose first experience with Frank Herbert's work was *Children of Dune* then went back to read anything else by him. Nor is Herbert the only SF writer of his era whose late career consisted largely of tacking new books onto his best-known series, each less and less interesting to anyone but long-term fans. When a newcomer to the field picks up one of these books, with expectations based on the author's reputation, that may be the last SF book that person reads.

As it happens, three of the books in this month's column are series installments, and they show various successful approaches to the problems posed by a multi-book series. The ideal, of course, is to compose each book so that a reader can happen upon it and get a complete story. But when an author wants to tell a story several thousand pages long, the plot doesn't automatically break into convenient book-sized units. One sometimes has to say, "Start at the beginning; it'll be worth your while."

THE STARS ASUNDER
by Debra Doyle and James D. Macdonald
Tor, $24.95 (hc)
ISBN: 0-312-86410-8

This sixth volume (and first hardcover) in the popular "Mageworlds" is a prequel, examining the early life of Arekhon, AKA "the Professor," a central figure in the series. Here, Doyle and Macdonald have managed to give a new reader a compelling story to follow while providing plenty of extra zing for those familiar with the previous books.

In the Mageworlds universe, a great rift exists between two parts of the galaxy. There has been no travel between them for so long that nobody remembers that it was once possible. In the normal course of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

things, a path to a distant planet is created by a mage who travels there in trance form, setting psychic beacons to guide ships to that world. Mages gain these powers by joining with others in a circle, using their combined powers to create a level of energy that none of them could attain alone. But bridging the rift in space will require a greater effort than any previously known. This book is the account of that effort, and the price paid by those who undertake it.

Arekhon is a major player in that effort. He gives up a role as an up-and-coming player in an interstellar trading family to become part of a Mage circle being formed by Garrod, the visionary who has taken as his task the bridging of the rift. The book also follows the careers of others who join the circle, including an agent sent to betray them. After an ambiguous success, a follow-up mission to the world Garrod has discovered puts the members of the circle smack into the middle of total war—an event foreign to the Mages' way of thinking.

At the same time, an arms race breaks out in the Mage worlds themselves, and the once lighthearted commerce raiding that supported the trading families has given way to a harsher conflict. The novel ends with the rift bridged, but with a multitude of dangers poised to cross that bridge and sow havoc on both sides.

While readers familiar with the series will find *The Stars Asunder* full of setups and foreshadowings of the future course of events, these should intrude minimally on the new reader's enjoyment of the novel. Ideally, such a reader will go on to *The Price of the Stars* (first in the series) and recognize that certain things were being prepared, without ever feeling, "Oh, that explains all those things that didn't make sense in the first book I read." Having read the previous books, I'm probably not a completely objective judge of that point. But on the whole, this does come across as an effective stand-alone book, and a good alternative starting point to one of the most enjoyable space opera series currently being written.

A DEEPNESS IN THE SKY
by Vernor Vinge
Tor, $27.95 (hc)
ISBN: 0-312-85683-0

Here's another prequel, this one to Vinge's Hugo winner, *A Fire Upon the Deep*. Actually, a more accurate description might be to call it an independent novel in the same universe as the earlier book. Even more than with *The Stars Asunder,* a reader needs little or no familiarity with the author's previous work to pick this volume up and enjoy it; in fact, this book is set so many millennia before *Fire Upon the Deep* that it is only in a science fictional setting that anyone would expect there to be much possibility of a relationship between the two.

The basic plot—interspersed with a fair amount of backstory—centers on a first-contact tale, seen from both sides of the contact. After a space battle, two groups of humans are stranded in orbit around a variable star, one of the planets of which harbors a nascent technological civilization. The humans' escape depends on their nurturing the technological growth of the spider-like inhabitants of the planet, named Arachna. The spiders, on the other hand, are primarily concerned with finding improved ways to survive the solar minimums, decades apart, during which the surface of their planet becomes uninhabitable.

The major character among the spiders is a polymath named Sherkaner Underhill—an inventor, educator, and scientist. He makes his

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

mark by finding a way to launch an attack against his nation's enemies, using the equivalent of space suits. This puts the government and military in his debt, so that he has little trouble finding resources to extend and continue his researches. But, as often happens with intellectuals in our own society, his disregard for conventional morality leads him into trouble—and eventually gets him branded a crackpot.

At the same time, the winning group ("Emergents") in the human conflict has shown its true colors, enslaving the losers ("Qeng Ho") by means of a disease (in its wild form known as "mindrot") tailored to make them focus intently on their tasks, without regard to their own well-being. The Qeng Ho work in secret to overthrow their oppressors, but the ships on both sides have been sufficiently damaged in the battle to make any rash moves fatal to all parties.

Vinge effectively plays the two strands of plot against one another, building tension well and keeping us interested in both the stranded human protagonists and the spider society. The meshing of the two plots at the denouement is nicely timed. And while the backstory, designed to tie this novel in with the previous book, may disorient a reader fresh to Vinge's work, the story does eventually work on its own terms.

But for this reviewer, the strongest element here is Vinge's sympathetic and playful building of the spider society and characters—an accomplishment on the level with the best in the field. The spiders are convincing characters, portrayed with a fine balance of humor and pathos, and their relationship with their environment is subtly portrayed. This reviewer was often reminded of Hal Clement at his best. Very strongly recommended.

AGAINST THE TIDE OF YEARS
by S.M. Stirling
Roc, $6.99 (pb)
ISBN: 0-451-45743-9

Here is the sequel to Stirling's *Island in the Sea of Time,* reviewed in this column last year. The main action takes place roughly nine years after "the Event," as the citizens of Nantucket call their removal from the twentieth century into the Bronze Age, which was the precipitating force of the first book. There, the Islanders found themselves trying to adapt to a world rich in resources, with only the unspecialized knowledge and skills of a random sample of today's population.

Here, we learn that the Islanders have thrived. Their advanced technology (more or less at the mid-nineteenth century level), combined with their knowledge of the entire history of discovery, has given them significant advantages over the "locals," although without making them invincible.

The rest of the world has begun to hear about the Islanders, and here we see them making contact with such diverse societies as the Mycenaean Greeks, the Babylonians, the Hittites, and others more or less familiar to prehistorians. Stirling has particular fun with the Greeks, bringing onstage the "real-life" models for the heroes of the Homeric epics, setting up the next volume's major plot development: the siege of Troy.

Much of the plot follows the Islanders' renegade nemesis, William Walker, relocated to Greece after his attempt to build a power base in Britain was defeated by the Islanders. Walker is not content merely to create a comfortable lifestyle among the primitive locals. Driven by the desire for revenge on the Islanders, he introduces modern military technology and tactics to the locals, and sets Agamemnon on

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a course of conquest that will eventually bring on the confrontation with the Islanders at Troy.

Unlike the Vinge or the Doyle-Macdonald, this book doesn't attempt to stand on its own feet; it's aimed almost exclusively at readers who know the first volume. Stirling's strategy is to set up a game of sufficient interest to make it worth the reader's trouble to go find the first book and catch up with the series at the beginning. As my review of the first volume should have made clear, I think he has done so very convincingly.

PARIS IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY
by Jules Verne (translated by Richard Howard)
Del Rey, $11.95 (tp)
ISBN: 0-345-42039-X

While there are plenty of strong contenders for the title, one could make an excellent case for Jules Verne as the founder of science fiction as we know it. His way of using the discoveries of science and technology to launch his characters into adventures beyond the edge of the known remains one of the defining techniques of the genre. And it's a good bet that, ninety-five years after his death, he is still among the most widely read authors in the field.

So when a "lost novel" by Verne—rejected by his publisher and apparently forgotten—turned up a few years ago, there was considerable speculation on what it would be like.

The simple answer is that it will seem both familiar and a bit surprising to those who know Verne's other work. Those who think of Verne as a shill for the new technology that was sweeping his era are especially likely to be shocked at the dystopian tone of *Paris in the Twentieth Century*. His hero, Michel, is a poet in an era that has forgotten poetry—at least, the great romantic strain, typified by Victor Hugo, that had been the glory of French literature in the years just before Verne's arrival on the scene.

This strain of uncertainty about the benefits of science does show up elsewhere in Verne's work—the possessors of high technology (Captain Nemo comes to mind) are often portrayed as evil, driven characters. So it is not really surprising that the theme appears in this early novel—a predecessor in many ways to such better-known scientific dystopias as Huxley's *Brave New World*. And the overall course of the plot will not surprise readers familiar with those works.

We first meet Michel as he takes part in his school's graduation exercises, at which he wins a prize for Latin verse. The onlookers meet this accomplishment with derision, and the society's true values are clear when Michel receives as his prize a copy of a factory manual. Nor is there any future for a poet in this France of 1960: Michel becomes an apprentice in a bank, where he is assigned (after demonstrating his inability to run a calculating machine) to assisting the keeper of the ledger, a huge book chronicling the bank's doings. His only delights are in the company of a few sympathetic souls, throwbacks to a more humane era.

Of course, their nostalgia is futile; the book ends (predictably, to most modern readers) with Michel's utter defeat.

Yet despite its many predictable elements, the book is a fascinating study. Verne's vision of the twentieth century has the usual proportion of hits and misses among its "predictions." At one point, Michel hears (and flees from) an electric concert—in which two hundred pianos are wired together to be played

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

by a single performer. We could nitpick the details, but the idea that electricity would be used to make music louder—and that some sensitive souls would consider this new music anathema—is right on the money.

On the other hand, as Eugen Weber points out in a useful introduction, the notion that a bank would still keep its records in an oversize hand-written ledger seems quaint to us—although of course Verne's day knew of no better medium for storing information.

There are plenty of other points at which a thoughtful reader might find lessons about the limits on how well our own era can foresee the future.

It is instructive, as well, to note Verne's artistic conservatism—at least if one can take the sympathetically portrayed characters' opinions as echoing those of the author. Modern music, in particular, is dismissed as garbage, with Wagner cited as the source of the pollution. The classics of French literature are held up as models, and the decay of modern taste can be measured by the fact that, when Michel attempts to find a nineteenth-century French book, he learns that there are none in print. It comes as no surprise that the final blow to Michel is when he writes a book of poems, *Hopes,* and discovers that no publisher will touch it.

The world didn't lose any great masterpiece with the failure of Verne's publisher to buy *Paris in the Twentieth Century* when it was submitted. Anyone wanting to find out what Verne's writing was about is still better advised to turn to *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea,* or *Around the World in 80 Days.* But serious students of early SF, and those interested in seeing our own era in an unexpected light, will find the lost Verne novel worth their time.

DEEP TIME: HOW HUMANITY COMMUNICATES ACROSS MILLENNIA
by Gregory Benford
Avon Bard, $20.00 (hc)
ISBN: 0-380-97537-8

Benford, best known for his large-scale SF epics of the Galactic center, turns to a non-fiction exploration of how we—individually and as a species—can communicate with the far future. This exploration is in the context of four specific projects with which he has been involved: the storage of radioactive wastes, the creation of a message to be sent on the Cassini spacecraft, the "Library of Life" proposal to preserve a large random selection of wildlife, and the long-range preservation of Earth's environment.

As this selection of subjects suggests, Benford sees the question of communicating with posterity in the broadest possible scope. Most attempts employ one of two strategies: "High Church" and "Kilroy Was Here." The former attempts to transmit the ideals and esthetics of the cultural elite of an era, as being most worthy of preservation; the latter is the graffiti artist's gambit when he scrawls his name on a pyramid or temple wall—an impulse to which not even the famous and creative (e.g., Lord Byron) have been immune.

Radioactive wastes may remain hazardous for longer than the entire span of recorded history so far. So any storage site must be clearly marked to warn away future generations. No SF fan should have much problem imagining scenarios in which the future discoverers of such a site cannot even detect dangerous levels of radioactivity. (Most of us could not, unless we had reason to believe we needed to be on guard for it.) But the chance that someone coming upon such a site five thousand years from now will read twen-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tieth-century languages, or recognize any danger signs current in our era, is about as good as the chance that the next person who knocks on your front door will be fluent in classical Mayan. How do we create a warning for someone with whom we share no common language? The answer draws on landscape design, meant to create a site so deliberately hideous that any visitor will instantly recognize its wrongness, and take appropriate caution before deciding (for example) to dig for treasure.

Creating a message for an extraterrestrial race that might discover one of our spacecraft poses different problems. Benford and the others on the team working on this assignment came up with a variety of answers; however, in the process, a more interesting problem arose: communication with a contemporary whose agenda differed radically from the rest of the group's. One team member was so intent on winning various political points that the entire project was undercut. The unstated conclusion is that even the best strategy can fail in the face of someone not committed to its goals.

The "Library of Life" and the preservation of the environment are more abstract forms of communication, for which Benford puts forward interesting and largely convincing arguments. The projects raise the key question whether posterity will find our concern for such projects of any interest whatsoever. Of course, to make the assumption that nobody in the future will care and therefore to do nothing is to deprive the future of making its own choices in the matter.

A well-written and thought-provoking book from Benford; it would be a pleasure to see more non-fiction for a general audience from his hand. O

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

The con(vention) year climaxes with the NASFiC and the Australia WorldCon. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons) leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard. - Erwin S. Strauss

AUGUST 1999

5-8—**GenCon.** For info, write: **129 N. Hamilton Rd., Box 13500, Columbus OH 43213.** Or phone: **(800) 529-3976** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: Milwaukee WI (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Midwest Express Center. Guests will include: K.J. Anderson, Koenig. **(Web) www.andonunlimited.com/cons/gen99/.** Big gaming meet.

6-8—**DeepSouthCon. (504) 488-0489.** Best Western Landmark, Metairie (New Orleans) LA. M. Resnick, S. Jackson.

6-8—**DiversiCon. (612) 825-9353.** Holiday Inn Express, St. Paul MN. L. A. Graf, Ecklar, K. Rose, Circone, Hopkinson.

6-8—**Monster Rally. (410) 665-1198.** Crystal City Hyatt, Arlington VA. Christopher Lee, F. J. Ackerman. Horror film.

7-8—**Trek Celebration. (913) 327-8735. (Web) www.sfedora.com.** Valley Forge PA. Commercial Star Trek event.

10-16—**Romania National SF Conference. (00401) 223-0081** Valcea Cty., Romania. See the total solar eclipse.

13-15—**Comic Con. (E-mail) cciweb@aol.com. www.comic-con.org.** Convention Center, San Diego CA. Major meet.

13-15—**FantastiCon. (954) 434-6060. (E-mail) joemotes@aol.com.** Airport Hilton, Los Angeles CA. Commercial Trek event.

13-15—**WinCon. www.pompey.demon.co.uk/wincon.htm.** King Alfred's College, Winchester UK. J. Barnes. W. Ellis.

14-15—**FinnCon. (E-mail) conltea@utu.fin. (Web) www.utu.fi/tsfs/finncon.** Turku Finland. Connie Willis, Philip Pullman.

20-22—**BuboniCon, Box 37257, Albuquerque NM 87176. (505) 266-8905.** Howard Johnson East. McDevitt, Martin, Lubov.

20-22—**NecronomiCon, Box 1320, Back Bay Annex, Boston MA 02117.** Marriott, Providence RI. Lovecraft's Cthulhu.

26-29—**Conucopia, Box 8442, Van Nuys CA 91409.** Marriott, Anaheim CA. North American SF Con (NASFiC). $125 at door

26-29—**Poland Nat'l. Con, ul. Koszykowa 69 #4, Warsaw 00-667, Poland. (Web) rassun.art.pl/polcon.** T. Kolodziejczak.

27-30—**Galileo, 38 Planetree Ave., Fenham, Newcastle-upon-Tyne NE4 9TH, UK. Heathrow Park, London UK.** Star Trek.

28-29—**Neutral Zone, 16 Annandale, Darlington, Durham DL1 3QX, UK. dlawson@darlington.ac.uk.** Star Trek.

28-30—**Shinnenkai, Box 110, Didcot, Oxon OX11 7YH, UK. Radisson Edwardian Heathrow, London UK.** F. Perry. Anime.

SEPTEMBER 1999

2-6—**AussieCon 3, Box 688, Prospect Heights IL 60070.** Melbourne, Australia. Gregory Benford. The WorldCon. A$225.

3-5—**Anime Iowa, Box 5303, Coralville IA 52241. nipponb@aol.com.** Collins Plaza, Cedar Rapids IA. Kuni Kimura.

3-6—**FilkContinental, Badstr. 38, Berlin D-13357, Germany. Youth Hostel, Guetersloh (Berlin).** SF/fantasy folksinging.

9-12—**OutsideCon, Box 30695, Clarksville TN 37040.** Camp Marymount, Fairview TN. SF/fantasy camp-out.

10-12—**ArmadilloCon, Box 27277, Austin TX 78755. (512) 868-0036.** Omni South Park. S. Stewart, W. Spencer, Allston.

10-12—**CopperCon, Box 62613, Phoenix AZ 85082. (602) 973-2341.** Holiday Inn Sunspree. David Weber, Brett Bass.

10-13—**BreakAwayCon, 15420 Vanowen St. #22, Van Nuys CA 91406.** Radisson, Los Angeles CA. M. Landau. Space:1999.

AUGUST 2000

31-Sep. 4—**ChiCon 2000, Box 642057, Chicago IL 60664.** Bova, Eggleton, Baen, Turtledove, Passovoy. WorldCon. $135.

AUGUST 2001

30-Sep. 3—**Millennium PhilCon, 402 Huntingdon Pike #2001, Rockledge PA 19046.** Philadelphia PA. WorldCon. $135.

AUGUST 2002

30-Sep. 3—**ConFrancisco 02, Box 61363, Sunnyvale CA 94088.** Bay Area CA. WorldCon. $100.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

CLASSIFIED MARKETPLACE

Advertise in the World's leading science fiction magazines with our Asimov's/Analog combined classified section. Ad Rates per issue: $2.95 per word (10 word minimum), $125 per column inch (2.25 inch maximum). SPECIAL INTRODUCTORY OFFER: Buy two issues and receive a third issue FREE. Send orders to: Dell Magazines, Classified Department, P.O. Box 1510, Clearwater, FL 33757-1510. Direct inquires to: (800) 237-9851; Fax (727) 445-9380.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

MILWAUKEE WRITERS! I am looking for more people to workshop stories with. Call: (414) 289-0595 or E-Mail: fiction_writing@yahoo.com

AUTHORS SERVICE

ATTENTION AUTHORS. Established publisher with international offices can arrange the editing, publication, promotion, warehousing, and distribution of your book. Pentland Press, Dept. EQ, (800) 948-2786.

BOOKS/PUBLICATIONS

Did you enjoy THE QUANTUM ROSE?
Read more great SF Romance in the latest books from two award-winning authors.
Jennifer Dunne's bestseller *RAVEN'S HEART*
from www.newconceptspublishing.com and
Rickey Mallory's bestseller *TIME RIDER*
from www.dreams-unlimited.com

BUYING SCIENCE FICTION magazines, book collections. Will travel for large accumulations. Bowman, Box 167, Carmel, IN 46082.

Nuclear Transmutation: The Reality of Cold Fusion
(hardcover) by Dr. Tadahiko Mizuno; $32.95, No. America; Infinite Energy Press, Box 2816-AN, Concord, NH 03302-2816; staff@infinite-energy.com; http://www-infinite-energy.com Ph: 603-228-4516 Fax: 603-224-5975

MILLENNIUM MARS CALENDAR

54 full-color, 11x17 pages • Essays on Mars planetary science & terraforming scenarios • Panoramic illustrations of Mars today and Mars tomorrow! **Two calendars in one,** Earth millennium years 2000 and 2001 overlapping one 20-month Mars year. An upbeat look at the future of space exploration.
Institute of Implied Science • P.O. Box 45926 • Madison WI 53744
www.tomorrowsf.com/market/mars/welcome.html

INSTRUCTION

PIANO TUNING PAYS: Learn with American School Home-Study Course. (800) 497-9793.

CATALOGS

FREE OCCULT CATALOG! Witchcraft, Occult, British Isles. Books, jewelry, ritual items, incense. AzureGreen, POB 48-ASI Middlefield, MA 01243. (431) 623-2155.

HEALTH

EXCITING NEW PRODUCTS! Step by step methods and instructions to cure your acne – once and for all! (900) 659-3936. $10p/call. 18+.

MISCELLANEOUS

DIFFERENT? Perhaps you're just better than everyone! Join the Church of the SubGenius, learn to exploit your abnormality. Membership: $30, Book of the SubGenius $19.45. Bizarre introductory pamphlet just $1.00. P.O. Box 140306, Dept. A, Dallas, TX 75214. Credit cards, (888) 669-2323. Website: www.subgenius.com

PLASTIC MODELS: Space, Sci-Fi, TV, movies, etc. Free catalog, also buying/trading. Green's, Dept. DL, Box 55787, Riverside, CA 92517. (909) 684-5300; (800) 807-4759; FAX (909) 684-8819; dl@greenmodels.com; http://www.greenmodels.com

GOOGALIES™ – The Ultimate Lens Cloth from Andromedan! www.andromedan.com/googalies

FREE AD OFFER IN OUR SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE COMBO

Place an ad in our next two issues and receive a third issue FREE!

CALL (800) 237-9851
FAX (727) 445-9380

Dell Magazine
Classified Department
P.O. Box 1510
Clearwater, FL 33757-1510

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

NEXT ISSUE

OCTOBER/ NOVEMBER DOUBLE ISSUE!

Next month is our immense October/November Special Double Issue. Last year, three out of the eighteen short works on the Final Hugo Ballot were from that issue, so keep an eye on this year's Double Issue as well! It's one of the best reading bargains you'll find in the SF genre—considerably more fiction for a lower cover price than the average paperback novel with a much greater variety of work.

We lead off with a special Guest Editorial by one of the giants of our field, Grandmaster **Jack Williamson,** who takes a moving and inspiring look back over his incredible sixty-year career in "Survival: A Brief Reflection on a Life in Science Fiction."

COVER STORY

Our cover story is by Hugo and Nebula Award-winner **Kim Stanley Robinson** who takes us to the *once*-Red Planet for a sequel to his famous novella "Green Mars," as a group of people set out on a dangerous adventure across the bleak and wintery surface of a Mars where terraforming has gone disastrously wrong—setting sail in an iceboat across frozen seas in search of the tallest mountain in the solar system, in the bittersweet and evocative "A Martian Romance." The beautiful cover is by Hugo Award-winning artist **Jim Burns.**

TOP-FLIGHT WRITERS

Next, the winner of more awards than anyone else in the history of SF, **Connie Willis,** goes Underground in a major new novella, plunging us into the nearly endless maze of tunnels beneath London that make up the London subway system in a wry but spooky and moving search for the unexpected origins of "The Winds of Marble Arch." Best-selling author **Walter Jon Williams,** takes us back to the dark, desperate days of the American Civil War, and sets off down the Mississippi with the highly eccentric crew of a gunboat on a secret and almost suicidally dangerous mission, one which might change the course of the War, and of all subsequent history. This almost-novel-length novella, "Argonautica," is packed with enough suspense, action, nautical lore, and sea-going adventure to fuel an entire trilogy!

Multiple Hugo and Nebula-winning author **Mike Resnick** returns with a vivid look at the price you have to pay to grow "Hothouse Flowers." The winner of SFWA's 1998 Author Emeritus Award, **Nelson Bond,** spins a sharp and wickedly sly little parable about "The Proof of the Pudding." Nebula and World Fantasy Award-winner **Michael Swanwick,** who placed an unprecedented *three* stories in the same category on this year's Final Hugo ballot, dares you to come back to the Cretaceous with him and go "Riding the Giganotosaur." Hugo and Nebula-winner **Gardner Dozois** takes us to a future Earth grown almost as enigmatic as an alien planet, where "A Knight of Ghosts and Shadows" must battle against some very strange adversaries indeed—not least of which is his own troubled heart. **Tony Daniel** takes us on a grueling journey through some bizarre and wonderful countryside, as a group of friends struggle to obey a summons to come "In from the Commons." And **Richard Wadholm** spins an elegant and impressive tale of disaster, betrayal, and revenge in a high-tech future, in a compelling hard-science adventure called "Green Tea."

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" muses about "Autographs"; and **Norman Spinrad's** "On Books" examines "Closure"; plus an array of cartoons, poems, and other features. Look for our October/November Special Double Issue on your newsstand on September 14, 1999.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

INSPIRE THE FLIGHT OF YOUR IMAGINATION

ANALOG SCIENCE FICTION AND FACT extends your insight into the infinite world of science. Gain endless knowledge and pleasure through the viewpoints of the most respected authors in the science field. You'll find there are no limits to where your scientific imagination will take you!

SUBSCRIBE TODAY!

Receive 2 years (24 issues) for only $79.94 or for $39.97 receive 1 year (12 issues).

Call toll free	OR	mail your order to:
1-800-333-4561		**ANALOG**
Outside the USA: 303-678-8747		PO Box 54027, Boulder CO 80322-4027

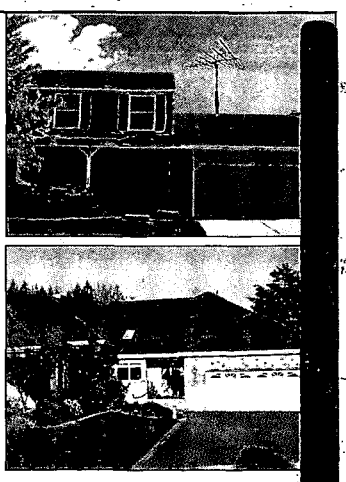
Outside U.S.A.: Add $8 per year for shipping & handling. (U.S. funds only, payment with order.) Please allow 6 to 8 weeks for delivery of your first issue. We publish a double issue in July/August, which counts as two issues toward your subscription.

H1759

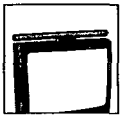
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Stealth antenna hides under gutters but performs like big ugly antennas

The new Max Antenna by GE is the low-profile, high-gain way to get flawless reception of broadcast signals without expensive installation.



by Hope Chapman



The Max Antenna by GE is the ultimate TV antenna system.

Electronic engineers agree—your television is only as good as the signal it receives. Both cable and satellite television systems have spent a great deal to improve the quality of their transmission, but they can be extremely expensive, they aren't available in all areas and may not provide access to local TV stations. Luckily, there is a new antenna from GE that will provide breakthrough performance without making your family room look like something out of the fifties.

Clear alternative. The Max Antenna series from GE uses a revolutionary electromagnetic design to maximize installation flexibility and yield longer range reception of off-air VHF and UHF signals. Unlike a conventional dipole antenna, the Max Antenna can receive signals in both vertical and horizontal planes with minimum cross-polarization loss. This design allows for the first low-profile antenna solution that provides numerous installation options.

Superior components. The key to the superiority of this antenna is its ingenious use of the latest electromagnetic technology—providing high gain and full channel coverage as well as the greatest amount of mounting flexibility. First, the antennas were designed around a wide band element to achieve the greatest amount of gain in a relatively small space. Next, an amplifier and matching network was designed to enhance the reception of weak signals. This amplifier also adds very little distortion to the strong signals, giving it a balanced amount of gain. A filter on the amplifier board will allow for good matching between the antenna and amplifier. Special attention was paid to design an antenna-amplifier combination that would be completely compatible with the new digital transmission format. It has been designed for strong signal distortion rejection and a low amount of noise. It is omnidirectional and requires no adjustments, orienting or fine tuning during use. You simply install it, set it and forget it.

Risk-free reception. The Max Antenna comes with Comtrad's exclusive risk-free home trial. If you are not completely satisfied, return it within 90 days for a full "No Questions Asked" refund.

The best antenna you'll never see.

Would you rather have the "old-fashioned" unsightly antenna tower or get even better reception with one that you can mount horizontally or vertically.

Max Indoor/Outdoor Antenna $49.95 $7.95 S&H
20-mile range

Mid-range Max Antenna . . . $69.95 $9.95 S&H
40-mile range

Super Max Antenna . . . . . $99.95 $11.95 S&H
60-mile range

Please mention promotional code **5733-16222.**

For fastest service, call toll-free 24 hours a day

800-992-2966

comtradindustries
2820 Waterford Lake Drive, Suite 102 Midlothian, VA 23112

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED